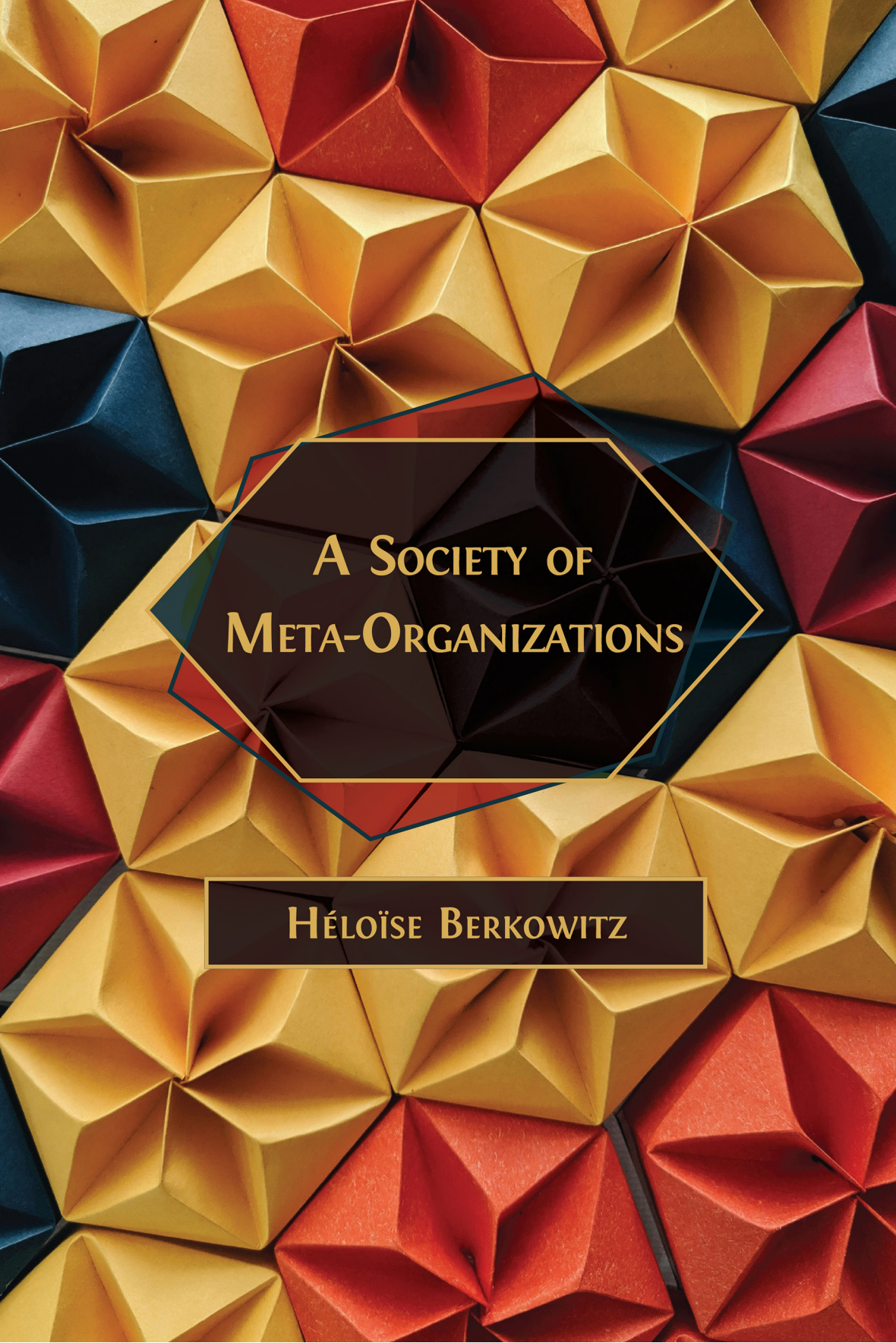
A Society of
Meta-Organizations
Héloïse Berkowitz

A SOCIETY OF META-ORGANIZATIONS

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Héloïse Berkowitz

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations vii

List of Tables ix

Acknowledgments xiii

Preface xv

1. Why Study Meta-Organizations? 1
   - The context 1
   - Motivations of the book: A distinctive meta-organizational approach 5

2. Meta-Organization as an Important Empirical Phenomenon in Contemporary Societies 13
   - Meta-organizations are everywhere and are numerous 14
   - Analysing the diversity of meta-organizations 19
   - The significance of meta-organizations for contemporary societies: Roles and activities of meta-organizations 33
   - Conclusion 38

3. The Conceptual Specificities of the Society of Meta-Organizations 39
   - Why do meta-organizations matter as a dedicated concept? 41
   - Methodological challenges of studying meta-organizations 43
   - Developing a meta-organizational analytical perspective 45
   - Conclusion 50

4. Theorizing Meta-Organizations and Social Orders 51
   - The decisional perspective on social orders 52
   - From infra- to (meta-)organizationality: An integrated framework 63
   - Conclusion 69

5. Meta-Organizations as Spaces for (Counter)-Hegemonic Dynamics 71
Imperatives and paradoxes of meta-organizations and transformations of social orders 73
Meta-organization, macro-organization and the proliferation of 'organizational monsters' 76
Shifting paradigms and imagining alternatives 86
Conclusion 92

6. Meta-Organizations and the Transformations of Social Orders 93
The manifestations and consequences of meta-organizational proliferation 95
Meta-organizing sustainable transformations of social orders in territories 97
Decisional and alternative organizing among organizations 99
Conclusion 102

Partial Glossary of Concepts 105

References 111

Index 137

List of Illustrations

2.1.	Meta-organizations' functions based on activities and logics of actions. Image adapted from Berkowitz (2019).	p. 37
4.1.	Meta-organizationality and the decisional perspective on meta-organizations. Image by the author.	p. 64
4.2.	Tentative overarching model showing how infra-organizationality, structural and entitative organizationality, contextual organizationality and meta-organizationality affect one another. Image based on Berkowitz (2024), Berkowitz and Bor (2024), Berkowitz et al. (2024) and Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024).	p. 67
5.1.	Multi-directional system of decisions in macro-organization, with and without resistance and exit. Image adapted from Coulombel and Berkowitz (2025).	p. 81
5.2.	Model of creating decided order among organizations, as well as directionality, responsibility and relations among participating organizations. Image by the author.	p. 83

List of Tables

2.1.	Category of registration to the transparency register. Source: the author.	p. 17
2.2.	Category of registration as meta-organization. Source: the author.	p. 18
2.3.	Number of meta-organizations registered. Source: the author.	p. 18
2.4.	Typology of sectoral or domain-based meta-organizations, i.e. organizations with members from the same sector or domain of society. Source: the author.	p. 24
2.5.	Possible profiles of meta-organizations based on membership segmentation. Source: the author.	p. 26
2.6.	Scale and scope of meta-organizational mandates. Source: Berkowitz (2019).	p. 28
2.7.	Specialization and specificity of meta-organizational mandates and membership. Source: Berkowitz (2019).	p. 30
2.8.	Sectoralization of meta-organizational mandates. Adapted from Berkowitz (2019).	p. 30
4.1.	Structural, entitative and contextual organizationality. Adapted from Grothe-Hammer (2019), Grothe-Hammer et al. (2022) and Berkowitz et al. (2024).	p. 61
4.2.	Description of the properties of social order. Adapted from Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024).	p. 62
4.3.	Dimensions of social orders, from infra-organizationality to meta-organizationality. Source: the author, adapted from Grothe-Hammer et al. (2022), Berkowitz et al. (forthcoming), Berkowitz and Bor (2024), Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024).	p. 67

Je ne reviendrai pas sur des thèses que la pratique a finalement chamboulées comme celles de l'universalité de la science, de sa neutralité, de son assimilation avec la vérité. Pourquoi vouloir défoncer des portes ouvertes ? La science n'est ni universelle, ni neutre, ni synonyme de la vérité absolue. Tous ces vêtements lui ont été donnés pour qu'elle participe au grand projet colonial énoncé par Descartes: 'dominer la nature et les natures par le biais de la connaissance'.

Sony Tabou Lansi, *Encre, sueur, salive et sang* (2015)

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Preface

I wrote this book based on my research habilitation: a French specificity of the higher education system. *L'habilitation à diriger des recherches* asks scholars to reflect on their previous works, on their identity as a researcher and educator, to outline a red thread in their past and future research and to outline a research agenda. Meta-organizations have been the big red thread of my research since my PhD thesis. Although I completed other works, one could say I have been fascinated by the lack of presence of meta-organizations: their absence in academia as a phenomenon of interest, and their absence in public discourse despite their significant effects on society. More than being fascinated, I have become obsessed with meta-organizations: with demonstrating their importance, with justifying the value of the concept in conferences, seminars, offices and classrooms, and with unpacking the implications of a theory of meta-organizations. One could say I fell down a rabbit hole.

Another red thread has been sustainability. During my PhD, meta-organizations were more of an excuse to talk about sustainability issues. Initially I was interested in the sharing economy, but for various reasons, I ended up doing my doctoral research on the oil and gas sector. Almost ten years later, I can say I feel ashamed about my naivety at the time. I wrote several papers on collective corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the oil and gas sector and the role of meta-organizations—including neutralizing civil society. CSR in the oil and gas sector is an oxymoron. It took me several years to realize that, no matter what, the oil and gas sector is one of the main culprits in the destruction of the planet, inflicting devastation at the nexus of genocide and ecocide, destroying existing relations among human and more-than-human communities and wasting more-than-human and human bodies, for purposes of capitalist accumulation.

In this book, I followed my own wandering path, moving away from the fascination with meta-organizations to integrate my growing awareness of the dehumanizing nature of organizations, meta-organizations and macro-organizations. This has led me to start thinking more recently about 'organizational monsters'. Starting from more empirical accounts of the importance of meta-organizations in today's social orders in the second chapter, I then move to the conceptualization of meta-organizations in the third chapter, to their theoretical position in relation to social orders and decisions in the fourth chapter, and then to power relations, dominations, devastation and how to repair this, acknowledging that in the end, meta-organizations are neither bad nor good by nature, but they are not neutral either. They can be spaces of hegemonic domination, and spaces of counter-hegemonic struggles. In this sense, I treat the 'society of meta-organizations' as an ambiguous, paradoxical idea that is both empirical and epistemological. If this book is a testimony to my fascination and near obsession with meta-organizations, I now hope to be able to leave them behind me and address other topics.

1. Why Study Meta-Organizations?

The context

In 2012, a small coastal city of Catalunya, Roses, experimented with a new form of governance of fisheries. Various organizations from different domains of society—economic, scientific, civil—came together and tested the first co-management committee in the region. It was dedicated to a specific species, the sand eel. In 2013, the committee received the WWF Award for conservation for the successful recovery and protection of the sand eel. After a few years, given the transformative outcomes of the committee, the government of Catalunya expanded this form of governance to other species and harbours (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz et al. 2018). In 2018, this Catalan model was also recognized by the United Nations Food Organization Administration for its successes both in the social and ecological spheres. The same year, this model was institutionalized as the norm for fishing in all of Catalunya through the 2020 Catalan Maritime Directive. Octopuses, cuttlefish, red shrimps and other marine beings all got their own co-management committee. What is so special about these committees? They bring together different types of organizations: the *cofradía*, an association of fishers and ship-owners of a given harbour; local scientific organizations specialized in marine biology, such as the Institut Ciencias Marinas (ICM); non-governmental organizations representing civil society, such as WWF and Greenpeace; and regional public administrations such as the General Direction of Fisheries. Each participant has equal voting power in the committee. While this may raise challenges in making joint decisions, once members reach a consensus, management plans will benefit from much more legitimacy and strength

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than when imposed from top-down, central administrations.

Consider now the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which was set up in 1946 as an international organization regulating and managing the whaling industry around the world. The IWC brings together governments and scientific actors around collective objectives to conduct scientific research on cetacean populations, set quotas and regulations for whaling based on species, regions and communities, and generally ensure the conservation of cetaceans, i.e. whales, dolphins and porpoises. This means that the organization also needs to address several environmental and human-related threats to cetaceans. However, its mission evolved over the years from promoting the whaling industry to conserving and protecting whale populations, seeking to restore populations to pre-industrial levels, thus effectively preventing whaling (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022).

Finance Participative France (FPF) is a multi-stakeholder association that was set up in 2012 to promote and support an alternative financing system, i.e. crowdfunding, in France. FPF played a key role in the development and regulation of crowdfunding platforms as alternatives to the dominant banking system (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2017, 2019b, 2024). FPF helped to foster the development of crowdlending, crowdequity and crowdgiving, facilitating access to these funding options for small businesses in particular. FPF was created with the hope to embody a more sustainable and humane model of financing. This association brought together different organizations from the sector but also civil society organizations, law firms and other stakeholders interested in the development of crowdfunding. FPF offered a variety of activities for members and non-members in the country or abroad, including capacity-building workshops, outreach events, as well as self-regulation and co-regulation activities.

One last example. The international peasant movement La Vía Campesina was founded in 1993 to defend the interests and rights of small-scale farmers and rural communities worldwide. La Vía Campesina brings together organizations and movements from many countries and regions, especially from the Global South. Its objectives are to ensure food sovereignty, the respect of land rights and social justice, and to foster transitions to sustainable food systems (Desmarais 2012). This international movement identifies a variety of ecological and social

issues faced by rural populations, from land dispossession to access to non-polluted water. By defending alternative local food systems and the rights of rural communities, La Vía Campesina embodies an alternative to the dominant capitalistic order of industrialized, corporatized and globalized agriculture (Desmarais 2008).

What do these very different organizations have in common? They are all meta-organizations—that is to say, organizations comprising of other organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008). Member organizations have not merged into a new social actor. On the contrary, they maintain their autonomy, with their own identities, objectives, strategies and resources, but come together to create a new, meta-level actor (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025). These meta-organizations create social order beyond and among formal organizations.

Another quality that co-management fisheries, the IWC, FPF and La Vía Campesina have in common is that they are all meta-organizations which seek to create social orders that are, to some extent, more just and more socio-ecologically sustainable. Many works agree that the complex problems we are facing today require complex collective arrangements in the form of more or less organized collaborations among a variety of actors, from public to private organizations, from civil society to higher education and research (Ambos and Tatarinov 2023; Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Chaudhury et al. 2016; Coulombel and Barron 2024; Ferraro, Etzion, and Gehman 2015; Gümüsay et al. 2022; Starik and Heuer 2002; Valente and Oliver 2018). And the literature also suggests that collaborations between organizations are necessary even to contest dominant social orders (which create the very problems we face) to build alternative orders (see Vijay et al. 2026 for a review).

Yet, it is interesting to note that meta-organizations can simultaneously appear as solutions to many complex societal problems, as root causes of these very problems and, under certain conditions, as social innovations to tackle these problems (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022).

In this book, I seek to explore how meta-organizations can serve as both a remedy to and a cause of complex societal problems, and to examine the conditions under which they can act as transformative agents. In so doing, I intend to emphasize that we live not only in a 'society of organizations' (Borraz 2022; Perrow 1991) but also in a society of meta-organizations, and I will explore the implications of this.

For the purpose of this book, I use a key distinction made by Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989, p. 179) about societal and social contexts to define: 1) 'society' as the "presence of supra-individual agencies of training and enforcement" that structure human lives and manipulate decision capacity; and 2) the 'social' as ways of "being with others"—that is to say the coexistence with other humans, or more-than-humans for that matter, which most fundamentally creates responsibility for the 'other'. In a society of meta-organizations, many of these 'supra-individual agencies' are mostly meta-organizations. And these meta-organizations affect social orders, i.e. the various stabilized and temporarily fixed ways of being with others: the various relations of coexistence.

Consider Perrow's (1991) argument in *A Society of Organizations*. The author claims that most historiographies of industrialization at the time failed to account for the effect of large organizations, and:

> that the appearance of large organizations in the United States makes organizations the key phenomenon of our time, and thus politics, social class, economics, technology, religion, the family, and even social psychology take on the character of dependent variables. Their subject matter is conditioned by the presence of organizations to such a degree that, increasingly, since about 1820 in the United States at least, the study of organizations must precede their own inquiries. (p. 725)

Perrow further shows that wage dependency implied a shift from self-sufficiency to dependence on employers for survival, and that industrial growth created externalities: negative side effects such as pollution or social dislocation which are never accounted for in institutionalized measures. He also traces the increased control consequences of bureaucracy, and how organizations exert control over individuals in subtle or indirect ways. Finally, Perrow shows quite compellingly how alternative trajectories—other ways societies might have developed or might develop in the future—are dismissed, thus contributing to collective amnesia in the social sciences (see also Vijay et al. 2026). The author contrasts these effects of the society of organizations with the dominant narrative, which sees industrialization as a straightforward, inevitable and desirable direction of 'progress' (see Rivera Cusicanqui 2020 on progress as a

Global North binary, historicist concept). Progress in that perspective is predicated on efficiency and productivity, for the control and benefit of elite groups; it also measures success in quantitative, predominantly economic terms such as GDP or financial performance and tends to be optimistic and celebratory, downplaying the harms of these measures and erasing alternatives.

In this book, I expand Perrow's argument on the society of organizations and describe some of the consequences of having so many meta-organizations. As suggested by Perrow's account, some hegemonic meta-organizations—such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund or national business and industry associations—amplify the presence of organizations by homogenizing societies worldwide. They disseminate and cement wage dependency through standardization, global trade agreements and policy conditionalities that attempt to subordinate all spheres of social life to market logics. They also amplify the resourcification of the world and the de-responsibilization of industries for their 'externalities', increasing bureaucratic control at multiple levels. In so doing, they also contribute to the colonization of imaginaries, naturalizing a certain type of employment as the only legitimate form of work, casting alternatives as backward or irrational, obstructing the emergence of alternative trajectories. But I also extend Perrow's argument by exploring how under certain conditions, some other meta-organizations—place-based and multi-stakeholder—provide arenas or spaces for counter-hegemonic dynamics.

Motivations of the book: A distinctive meta-organizational approach

Why is there a need for a meta-organizational approach to society at all? Is it not enough to speak of a society of organizations? The meta-organizational perspective introduces two primary distinctions. First, it provides a different theoretical framework for examining how organizations create 'decided order' among and beyond organizations. And second, it represents a different perspective on the dynamics of societal transformations.

A different theoretical view on organized collaboration among organizations

The meta-organizational approach offers some distinctive insights that other approaches have either missed or neglected. This is the key argument of Swedish sociologists Ahrne and Brunsson. The concept of meta-organization, as they introduced it (2005, 2008), has represented a major break from several dominant theories and approaches, which usually exhibit one of two tendencies : 1) considering meta-organizations as if they were similar to individual-based organizations, and 2) considering meta-organizations as if they were similar to non-decided social orders, that is to say networks or institutions (Berkowitz et al. 2022).

The concept of meta-organization draws attention to its specific constitutive dimensions. First, meta-organizations are made up of other organizations, and this has significant implications for their functioning, dynamics, and so on (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008). Second, meta-organizations are themselves organizations, or 'decided orders', which has important theoretical consequences. Decided orders rely primarily on decisions (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008, 2011; Luhmann 2018; Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). 'Decision' here does not describe a psychological choice, nor a social event. On the contrary, decision is understood as a type of communication that selects a particular option while implicitly or explicitly communicating discarded alternatives (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). Decisions are therefore always paradoxical (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008) in that they simultaneously close and open meaning (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). Living in a society of (increasingly numerous, interconnected) meta-organizations therefore has specific theoretical and practical implications.

So, what does it mean to talk about meta-organizations? As I will discuss later in the next chapter, meta-organizations cover a broad range of empirical phenomena (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Bor 2018; Berkowitz and Dumez 2016; Garaudel 2020; Laurent et al. 2020). From trade and business associations to cooperatives, associations of universities, federations and international organizations, the world is fraught with meta-organizations. They have been largely studied across a variety of fields of research, including strategy and management, public policy, regulatory governance, sociology of organizations. However, since Ahrne and Brunsson's

pioneer work, they have increasingly been treated as a specific concept, differing from other, conventional organizations or networks and institutions.

A different perspective on societal transformations

Thus, the meta-organization theory—or rather here 'decisionalism'—breaks from other dominant approaches by providing a different perspective on societal transformation. This is useful for understanding sustainability transitions, for instance. Living in a society of meta-organizations means that to enact change, we need to take into account the specificities of meta-organizations, but also of decided and non-decided social orders and their layering and intertwining.

So, how can we effectively transform society for more sustainability? To simplify, many prevailing perspectives on effecting change tend to fall within two dominant approaches. The first approach (which I call here the 'regulatory perspective') underscores the importance of institutions, institutional logics and legislation; while the second (which I call here the 'innovation perspective') emphasizes the roles of markets, businesses and innovations.

The regulatory perspective underscores the critical role played by institutions, states, global governance, legislative bodies, public policies and regulatory frameworks as essential drivers of sustainable transformation (Biermann et al. 2012; Gemmell and Scott 2013). This perspective operates under the assumption that change needs to be mandated or imposed upon society, particularly economic actors, to ensure responsible behaviour. This means that institutions must give directions through public policy or procurement—or that they must foster innovation, as in the innovation perspective (Mazzucato 2013; Schot and Steinmueller 2018). The regulatory perspective also comes with a view of society as fraught with inherent risks that require mitigation. Consumers must be protected from businesses as new business models or technological innovations raise ethical concerns (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019). This has been largely analysed, for instance, in the development of the sharing economy, with many scholars calling for more regulation of platforms to protect consumers (Brescia 2016; Hildebrand, Puri, and Rocholl 2016; Rauch and Schleicher 2015; Zrenner

2015). This focus on institutions and regulation by organization and management scholars also naturally comes with an emphasis on neo-institutional theory, institutional logics and institutional work (Thornton and Ocasio 1999), i.e. how institutions change and how to change said institutions, including to address grand challenges (Gümüsay, Claus, and Amis 2020; Taupin 2019).

But this regulatory perspective raises at least two important problems: a theoretical one and a practical one. The theoretical problem is that organizational and management scholars have tended to 1) view everything from the institutional lens, thus erasing other approaches; 2) neglect the organizational dimension of everything outside of formal organizations; and 3) miss the constitutive nature of organization for society (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Apelt et al. 2017; Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020). The practical problem is that regulations and institutions are often centralized, national or transnational, and developed by decision-makers distanced from local realities, resulting in legislation being imposed in a top-down manner and thus creating regulatory misfits, especially in territories (Berkowitz 2023a; Finkbeiner et al. 2017). 'Regulatory misfit' refers to situations where existing regulations, policies, or governance structures are inadequate, inappropriate, or ill-suited to address emerging challenges, specific contexts or territories, or changing circumstances. In these cases, the existing regulatory framework can become obsolete or can fail to regulate or effectively manage the issues it was originally designed for, resulting in gaps, inefficiencies and further unintended and unattended consequences. Regulatory misfits and regulatory obsolescence are likely to happen if regulators and regulations fail to anticipate or adapt to the rapid pace of innovations. In that context, meta-organizations can act as regulatory innovation intermediaries (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024).

The innovation perspective, on the other hand, puts the emphasis on innovation, entrepreneurs, markets and economic growth. This perspective echoes the longstanding view that self-interest, even cupidity, will drive change (Smith 1776). The economy acts as a primary force for change. This perspective is based on the underlying assumptions that progress is always desirable, that (technological) innovations will drive progress and that innovations can solve all ecological issues (Berkowitz and Guérineau 2022). I am not discussing

social innovation and the social and solidarity sector here, as this field has a different understanding of innovation (Pansera and Fressoli 2021; Petrella et al. 2021; Petrella, Richez-Battesti, and Mendez 2023; Richez-Battesti, Petrella, and Vallade 2012; Ziegler et al. 2022). However, in its most common and dominant sense, innovation refers to the creation of new products, processes or market structures. In that dominant perspective, innovation is the key to long-term societal development. It involves continuous economic growth, which goes against the principle of heteronomous limits (Berkowitz and Guérineau 2022; Kallis 2019). The innovation perspective draws on the concept of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1996), underlining the capacity of innovation to disrupt, replace and renew economic systems. Most literature on transition studies draws on this perspective and views innovation as the central driver of systemic transformation (Elzen, Geels, and Green 2004; Geels, Berkhout, and van Vuuren 2016; Kivimaa and Kern 2016).

First of all, this perspective sets the ground for the development of sustainability through new business opportunities (the 'business case' of sustainability). This leads to approaches such as 'green' growth or 'blue' growth, i.e. policy framings that promise economic development in land-based ecosystems (green) and marine ecosystems (blue), without challenging underlying paradigms of extractivism and destruction. It encourages competitive behaviours and a quest for financial performance and profit accumulation, rebranding expansionism and predatory capitalism as sustainable development (see Orain 2025). Second, it also pins the responsibility and potential for change on economic players, entrepreneurs and innovators, e.g. via market or corporate strategies such as nudging (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) and through the concept of corporate social responsibility (Cai, Jo, and Pan 2012). Third, and most importantly, this perpetuates an exploitative paradigm of organizations as systems of destruction (Berkowitz 2023a), a view that is centred on (human and nonhuman) resources to be exploited to achieve growth for companies, for states or even for territories (Mazzilli and Pichault 2018; Mendez and Mercier 2006).

Here again, I see at least two problems with this innovation perspective: a theoretical one and a practical one. The theoretical problem is that it fails to account for the dark side of innovations, their unintended and unattended consequences (Sveiby 2017). There is thus

a major bias in favour of innovation in most literature on the subject, precluding true criticism of (technological) innovation as a driver of change (Berkowitz and Guérineau 2022). The more practical problem is that the innovation perspective perpetuates a paradigm of economic growth in a world with finite resources, and therefore inevitably leads to further overshooting of planetary boundaries, exploitation of disposable categories of beings and consequent global collapses (Berkowitz 2023a; Berkowitz and Guérineau 2022; Pansera and Owen 2018).

In this book, I suggest a third, intermediary perspective on societal transformation, and explore the place of meta-organizations in creating, maintaining and transforming social orders (for sustainability or not). Meta-organizations have been largely promoted as transformative agents (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Lupova-Henry and Dotti 2022; Saniossian, Beaucourt, and Lecocq 2022). Indeed, under certain conditions, meta-organizations may support alternative forms of collaboration among organizations, enabling solutions that individuals, conventional organizations, states and markets could not develop on their own. However, we also know from the literature that meta-organizations can resist transition (Bor and O'Shea 2022) and perpetuate relations of domination and unfair global orders (Carmagnac and Carbone 2019; Fernandes et al. 2026). This is why it appears crucial to understand the natures, functions and roles of meta-organizations in contemporary society, especially in enacting societal transformation or resisting it, and what implications this has for society as a whole.

Objective and structure of the book.

The objective of this book is to show the extent to which we live in a society of meta-organizations. Some of the big questions I am more or less directly interested in are: why are meta-organizations here? What do they do and how are they organized? How should we study them? What do they do to social orders? Can they contribute to societal transformations—and if so, how?

This remainder of the book is organized as follows. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I show the (empirical) importance of meta-organizations in society and describe their variety as a multifaceted and ubiquitous phenomenon. Then, in Chapter 3, I examine the conceptual

specificities and implications of a society constituted and dominated by meta-organizations. In so doing, I treat meta-organization as a discrete concept and describe some methodological challenges raised when operationalizing a meta-organizational analytical approach. In Chapter 4, I develop a more theoretical approach, resituating meta-organizations in decisional organization theory or decisionalism, thus going beyond meta-organizations to address social orders in general. Then, in Chapter 5, I focus on the problems that the society of meta-organizations creates for societal transformation and how meta-organizations can constitute arenas or spaces of hegemonic or counter-hegemonic dynamics. In Chapter 6, I outline some possible research venues before concluding.

2. Meta-Organization as an Important Empirical Phenomenon in Contemporary Societies

The phenomenon of meta-organizations is constitutive of contemporary societies. And meta-organizations are not only numerous but also present everywhere. They continue to be created to achieve many goals and address many problems, and may take many different forms. Assessing their importance, as well as quantifying and understanding their presence and variety, is integral to understanding the society of meta-organizations. But it is challenging to do so. Indeed, meta-organizations operate across various domains and sectors and are often not required to report certain information. In this chapter, I first want to empirically substantiate this 'society of meta-organizations'. In so doing, I want to substantiate and extend Ahrne and Brunsson's (2005, 2008) initial claim that meta-organizations constitute a significant and diverse social phenomenon.

The diversity of meta-organizations might be even greater than the literature has truly accounted for, as I will explain. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that meta-organizations are more varied than other forms of organizations due to the wide range of member organizations that can participate in meta-organizations, but they assume that members of a given meta-organization are homogeneous in some ways. In this chapter, I attempt to showcase an even greater diversity by describing possible families of meta-organizations based on varying criteria. In so doing, I seek to understand the diversity, similarities and dissimilarities of meta-organizations—hence the idea of 'family' resemblances

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rather than categories (Berkowitz and Dumez 2016). In particular, I highlight variations in members and size, membership composition and segmentation, scale and scope, specificity and specialization of mandate, and sectoralization.

In this chapter, I start by providing empirical evidence for the importance of meta-organizations in society. They hold such a pivotal role thanks to their capacity to undertake joint actions that would not be possible otherwise. Meta-organizations have low-cost structures, as they do not require many resources to be established and maintained (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz and Dumez 2016; Bor and Cropper 2023). They also serve many different purposes (facilitating interactions among their members, fostering joint interactions with non-members, managing the identity and status of members, and handling common tasks that have been outsourced to them). Combined with a low-cost structure, this makes them not only valuable tools for coordination but also easy devices to set up and maintain, including when they remain dormant. To fulfil their purposes, meta-organizations can engage in a variety of activities that I will also discuss.

Meta-organizations are everywhere and are numerous

Many works since Ahrne and Brunsson's pioneer article and book have shown the ubiquity and omnipresence of meta-organizations in many different fields and sectors, from higher education (Brankovic 2018; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020), to public administration (Zyzak and Jacobsen 2019), health partnerships (Cropper and Bor 2018), industries, business associations and other professional associations (Laviolette et al. 2022; Renou 2021), international organizations (Kerwer 2013; Koch 2024), clusters (Gadille, Tremblay, and Vion 2013; Lupova-Henry and Dotti 2022), the social and solidarity sector (Maisonnasse, Petrella, and Richez-Battesti 2013) or cooperatives (Roux and Lecocq 2022), among others.

The qualitative importance of meta-organizations

A pioneer study showed the importance of meta-organizations for sustainability transformations in the oil and gas industry (Berkowitz 2016a). This first database of meta-organizations with at least one

member each from the oil and gas sector illustrated the diversity, scope and importance of meta-organizations. On a global scale, ninety-six meta-organizations were established between 1917 and 2014 in the oil and gas sector, either exclusively in this industry or across multiple sectors but including at least one oil company. These meta-organizations emerged in three historical waves. The first phase, 1917–1962, witnessed the development of 'traditional' meta-organizations, aiming to represent the industry and defend its interests against states (typical trade associations). From 1963 to 1999, 'business thematic meta-organizations' started to emerge, alongside traditional meta-organizations. Business thematic meta-organizations still brought together only business players but focused on some specific environmental issues. This was the case, for instance, with CONCAWE: an association conducting research on air pollution among other issues. And lastly, the period from 2000 to the present day has seen the advent of new forms of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, reflecting the need for collaboration to tackle certain complex problems and the fact that, alongside states, NGOs and other constituents can both contribute to piloting sustainability transitions and may also want to participate in meta-organizational governance.

These meta-organizations, especially traditional ones, tend to operate at national levels, but thematic and multi-stakeholder meta-organizations in particular might operate at international or transnational levels (Berkowitz 2015, 2016a). Depending on their scales, mandates and specificity, meta-organizations conduct many different activities with varying degrees of importance to sustainability transformations. Interestingly, it also appears that meta-organizations kept being created during the aforementioned historical waves and remained even when they were no longer active, i.e. when they became empty shells, dormant or zombie meta-organizations (Berkowitz 2016a). Meta-organizations are also important at a more local level, as the literature has shown for fisheries co-management committees, industrial clusters, the localization of aid development or cultural wastelands, among other examples (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz et al. 2023; Duprat, Baret, and Mendez 2023; Gadille, Tremblay, and Vion 2013; Henrion 2023; Maisonnasse, Petrella, and Richez-Battesti 2013; Mazzilli, Berkowitz, and Mammar El Hadj 2026; Xhauflair 2013).

How about quantitative evidence?

Meta-organizations are simply everywhere and yet we rarely think of them as such. This empirical importance of meta-organizations should start with sheer numbers, beyond the oil and gas sector alone. Yet, it is challenging to provide a specific estimate for the total number of meta-organizations, either in a national context such as in France, or internationally. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that there would be thousands upon thousands of meta-organizations. Meta-organizations populate all spheres of contemporary society, all domains and sectors, and may gather any and all types of organizations as members.

And indeed, as mentioned earlier, meta-organizations may encompass institutions such as international organizations, national trade associations, cooperatives, federations and confederations, some organized clusters, and associations of public administrations or of universities (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz and Bor 2017). Meta-organizations are not just everywhere and multiform, they are also somewhat of a black box (Berkowitz 2024). There is little standardized, consistent information about meta-organizations. There is generally no obligation for them to report on their own activities and data. There is no global database or index of meta-organizations.

The transparency register of the European Commission can somewhat provide a (partial) quantitative understanding of meta-organizations while also demonstrating why it is so hard to assess their quantitative significance. It is important to note that the transparency register is voluntary and self-compiled. While it is clearly a tool for transparency, its effectiveness depends on the willingness of organizations and individuals to participate and provide accurate and comprehensive information. Information is not homogeneous at all, and it is sometimes difficult to use.

As of January 2023, there were 12,435 registered organizations in the transparency register. On this basis, I attempted to distinguish between the meta-organizations and non-meta-organizations. One should keep in mind that this database only concerns organizations and individuals that seek to lobby EU institutions. There are many more meta-organizations worldwide, and many are not concerned with lobbying the EU.

Thirteen different categories of organizations or individuals can be registered (Table 2.1): 1) 'academic institutions'; 2) 'associations and networks of public authorities'; 3) 'companies and groups'; 4) 'entities,

offices or networks established by third countries'; 5) 'law firms'; 6) 'non-governmental organizations, platforms and networks and similar'; 7) 'organizations representing churches and religious communities'; 8) 'other organizations, public or mixed entities'; 9) 'professional consultancies'; 10) 'self-employed individuals'; 11) 'think tanks and research institutions'; 12) 'trade and business associations'; 13) 'trade unions and professional associations'.

Table 2.1. Category of registration to the transparency register. Source: the author.

Category of registration	**Total**
Academic institutions	317
Associations and networks of public authorities	160
Companies and groups	3,035
Entities, offices or networks established by third countries	5
Law firms	84
Non-governmental organizations, platforms and networks and similar	*3,488*
Organizations representing churches and religious communities	52
Other organizations, public or mixed entities	443
Professional consultancies	547
Self-employed individuals	146
Think tanks and research institutions	561
Trade and business associations	*2,628*
Trade unions and professional associations	*969*
Total	**12,435**

N.B.: In italics, obvious meta-organizations

Some categories constitute obvious meta-organizations, such as trade and business associations. Other categories are clearly not meta-organizations, such as self-employed individuals, law firms. But then, when investigating more, I found that some categories may or may not include meta-organizations: this is the case for academic institutions; associations and networks of public authorities; entities, offices or networks established by third countries; non-governmental organizations, platforms and networks and similar; organizations representing churches and religious communities; other organizations, public or mixed entities; and think tanks and research institutions (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Category of registration as meta-organization. Source: the author.

Category of registration	**Meta-organization?**	**Total**
Academic institutions	Maybe	317
Associations and networks of public authorities	Yes	160
Companies and groups	No	3,035
Entities, offices or networks established by third countries	Maybe	5
Law firms	No	84
Non-governmental organizations, platforms and networks and similar	Yes	3,488
Organizations representing churches and religious communities	Maybe	52
Other organizations, public or mixed entities	Maybe	443
Professional consultancies	No	547
Self-employed individuals	No	146
Think tanks and research institutions	Maybe	561
Trade and business associations	Yes	2,628
Trade unions and professional associations	Yes	969
Total		**12,435**

So we can estimate the number of meta-organizations registered as a lobbying organization between at least 7,245 (categories that are clearly identified as meta-organizations) to a maximum of 8,623 (adding the 'maybe' category) (Table 2.3).

Table 2.3. Number of meta-organizations registered. Source: the author.

Is it a meta-organization?	**Total**
Maybe	1,378
Yes	7,245
No	3,812

What we see from this is that meta-organizations may represent between 60% and 70% of all organizations seeking to influence the EU decision-making processes, which is incredibly high and yet not very surprising given that advocacy is an important activity of meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al. 2022).

Beyond this quick attempt at a quantitative overview of meta-organizations, we know from the literature that meta-organizations span absolutely all fields, from churches (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008) to cultural industries (Duprat, Baret, and Mendez 2023), from civil society (Laurent et al. 2020) to social movements (Karlberg and Jacobsson 2015), from cooperatives (Roux and Lecocq 2022) to global agreements (Garaudel 2020), from business associations (Berkowitz and Dumez 2015) to multi-stakeholder ones (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b), from local co-management committees to international organizations in ocean governance (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020), from Amazon rainforest indigenous communities (Fernandes and Berkowitz 2023) to the UN Global Compact and the Global Business Initiative (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz and Dumez 2015), from European contexts (Kerwer 2013) to African ones (Alo and Arslan 2023) and Latin American ones (Fernandes et al. 2026), from sports (Malcourant, Vas, and Zintz 2015) to higher education (Brankovic 2018)—in for profit and not-for-profit sectors alike (Karlberg and Jacobsson 2015; Laurent et al. 2020). Meta-organizations can even be organized into meta-meta-organizations or further, as is the case for FIFA (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). What we begin to grasp from this is the incredible empirical diversity of meta-organizations.

Analysing the diversity of meta-organizations

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that meta-organizations are much more diverse than traditional organizations. This great diversity can be attributed to the wide array of organizations that can create and be members of meta-organizations, from corporations—whether large multinationals or small and medium-sized companies, start-ups or family businesses—to hospitals, governments, public agencies, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, associations, indigenous communities, social movements, federations, and so on. Further contributing to this diversity of meta-organizations is that each can have multiple *types* of members, as I will delve into later. Interestingly enough, various literature, associations, conferences and related academic journals are dedicated to almost every type of founding

or member organization: family businesses, international organizations, public administrations, international businesses and so on. And yet there is no single association, conference or journal specifically dedicated to meta-organizations, despite their diversity.

Meta-organizations come in various colours, shapes and sizes. They can have larger or smaller membership, aiming to include a whole industry or just a selected group of organizations (Berkowitz and Dumez 2015). They can have different workforces, with or without a secretariat (Bor and Almpanopoulou 2026). In my study of the oil and gas sector, I studied some meta-organizations who outsourced the secretariat activities to a law firm (the VPSHR), whilst others did not have a secretariat at all and took turns at playing this role (Berkowitz 2015). Finance Participative France on the other hand has one person recruited by the meta-organization to act as a general secretariat (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019). Meta-organizations can have members from the same sector or from various sectors. They can have one objective or several. Their scale and scope can vary. They can conduct one activity or many. They can be old or new. They can be set up bottom-up or top-down. They can have little or many resources. They can meet regularly or seldom. Their decision-making processes can be very organized or not.

Various attempts have been made to categorize these meta-organizations in order to account for their extensive empirical diversity. If we take a step back from Ahrne and Brunsson's work, Astley and Fombrun (1983), for instance, suggested a classification system of what could be empirically understood as meta-organizations at the time, even though it was far from holistic and lacked Ahrne and Brunsson's theoretical bases. Their classification was based on types of association (direct/indirect) and forms of interdependence (commensalistic/symbiotic). They made a distinction between confederate, agglomerate, conjugate and organic collectives. However, their classification system primarily focuses on strategic management and overlooks the diversity of member types beyond firms, such as non-governmental organizations, associations, public actors and international organizations. They also do not account for the emergence of new organizational forms such as multi-stakeholder meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al. 2017).

In another effort, Gulati et al. (2012) proposed a taxonomy of 'meta-organizations' based on stratification and membership boundaries. The

authors suggest four types of meta-organizational designs involving closed or open boundaries/membership and low or high stratification: closed communities, open communities, extended enterprises and managed ecosystems. However, this definition tends to shift away from the core understanding of what meta-organizations represent (Berkowitz and Bor 2018; Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025).

Further, Garaudel (2020) argues that the diversity of meta-organizations can be attributed to two critical dimensions: 1) the alignment between the goals of meta-organization secretariats and the objectives pursued by member organizations, and 2) the extent and nature of the asymmetrical interdependences between the meta-organization and members. Moreover, Bor and Cropper (2023) also shed light on existing variations across meta-organizations, theorizing that some of these differences are rooted in the flow of resources. They categorize these resources into four types: member resources, associational resources, contributed resources and generated resources.

However, these works tend to be highly theoretical and still leave us wanting for a comprehensive understanding of meta-organizations as an empirical phenomenon. We know and understand that firms, for instance, come in various sizes, forms, mandates and sectors (from small and medium enterprises to family businesses, to large multinationals, to innovative firms and entrepreneurs, and so on). The commonalities and distinctions among these diverse meta-organizational forms remain insufficiently explored. Furthermore, there may still be unknown forms of meta-organizations.

Variations in types and size of member organizations

In classifying meta-organizations, we can look at family resemblances rather than pure categories. A first set of family resemblances can be found in types of members, size of members and size of meta-organizations. The initial focus of the literature has been on members and membership, as Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) argued that this was one key dimension of meta-organizations. A few authors have developed databases, e.g. one in the oil and gas industry (Berkowitz 2016a) and one in higher education (Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020), enabling the study of membership dynamics in those fields. Berkowitz and colleagues

provided the first analysis of meta-organizations based on membership, distinguishing between two families of meta-organizations: 1) business-only meta-organizations, encompassing meta-organizations comprised of businesses (in the form of trade associations, industry associations, business groups and similar entities); and 2) multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, which bring together constituents of various domains or sectors (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz and Dumez 2015).

Multi-stakeholder meta-organizations are particularly original and innovative and seem to have emerged more recently, according to these studies. This form, albeit with variations, has subsequently been identified in other sectors and fields (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b; Carmagnac and Carbone 2019; Saniossian, Lecocq, and Beaucourt 2022). This distinction added some nuance to Ahrne and Brunsson's assertion that meta-organizations tend to have homogeneous memberships (as in trade associations or international organizations). However, their central argument that membership plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of meta-organizations remains valid. Indeed, within meta-organizations, several works observed that membership often structures other critical organizational elements such as rules and sanctions, for instance through the threat of exit (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b).

Membership can further aid in classifying meta-organizations along two key dimensions: types of members and segmentation. First, regarding types of members, we consider the class or domain of organizations to which the members belong (e.g. businesses, universities, and civil society entities), but also the size of membership. And then, in the segmentation of membership, we consider the number of distinct types of members within a given meta-organization.

These families are not exhaustive and do not fully account for meta-organizations with more complex or overlapping membership or contributorship structures (Apelt et al. 2017; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024; Grothe-Hammer 2019a). Nonetheless, describing these types of members may serve as a useful starting point, showing family resemblances across various domains (Berkowitz and Dumez 2016).

As Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) postulate, there can be as many types of meta-organizations as there are types of organizations. One family of meta-organizations can be called 'sectoral meta-organizations' or

'domain-based meta-organizations', as they gather members from a specific sector or domain. There can be, for instance, business(-only) meta-organizations. These are composed only of business entities, i.e. corporations and economic players (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz and Dumez 2015). Examples of this family of meta-organizations include trade associations, professional associations, franchising networks and business groups (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Gulati, Puranam, and Tushman 2012; Renou 2021; Spillman 2018). Civil society meta-organizations, on the other hand, consist of non-governmental organizations and other representatives of civil society or not-for-profit sectors (Karlberg and Jacobsson 2015; Laurent et al. 2020). Higher education meta-organizations, science meta-organizations and research meta-organizations bring together universities, schools, higher education institutions or research centres (see for instance Bor 2014; Brankovic 2018; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020). Governmental meta-organizations are comprised of governments, states or entire countries, with the European Union being a notable example (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Kerwer 2013). Such meta-organizations can also include public administrations, such as cities in initiatives such as the Fab City Global Initiative (Berkowitz 2018), or municipalities (Zyzak and Jacobsen 2019). This is to be distinguished from the family of governing meta-organizations, which aim to organize the governance of common problems (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020).

International meta-organizations can be considered specific governmental meta-organizations at the international level, consisting of national governments, as seen with the European Union (again!) or the International Whaling Commission (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Kerwer 2019; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Kerwer 2013). Sports meta-organizations include FIFA, UEFA, World Anti-Doping Agency—all meta-organizations dedicated to sports (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Malcourant, Vas, and Zintz 2015). The realm of national and international sports is particularly complex, featuring meta-organizations, meta-meta-organizations and even meta-meta-meta-organizations that play significant roles within this domain. We could also consider food and agriculture meta-organizations. These can be viewed either as a subset of business meta-organizations, focusing on actors in the food and agriculture sector, or as a separate family of meta-organizations with

potential roles in piloting food system transitions (Lapoutte 2021).

Additionally, there are other possible families of meta-organizations, including those comprising of hospitals or other health organizations such as partners in paediatrics (Cropper and Bor 2018), or start-ups or fab labs (Berkowitz 2018), depending on what resemblances we focus on. Patent meta-organizations organize patent pools (Azzam and Berkowitz 2018), and so on and so forth. The list is not exhaustive, as meta-organizations can emerge in various domains and sectors, reflecting the vast diversity and adaptability of this organizational form. Some meta-organizations are more or less obvious (Coron, Garaudel, and Schmidt 2026; Koch 2026). Some associations or networks of social movements may be meta-organizations, as in the case of *Soulèvements de la Terre* (see Berkowitz and Bor 2024).

The general idea here is to add a qualifier to meta-organizations, based on their membership, as summarized in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4. Typology of sectoral or domain-based meta-organizations, i.e. organizations with members from the same sector or domain of society. Source: the author.

Type of meta-organization	**Type of members**	**Examples**
Business meta-organizations	Businesses only	Business groups, cooperatives, producer organizations, trade associations, franchising networks,
Civil society meta-organizations	Civil society representatives only	NGO associations, federations
Higher education and science meta-organizations	Universities, business schools, higher education organizations or research centres	League of European Research Universities, some R&D consortia (those only made of scientific organizations)
Governmental or public administration meta-organizations	National or local governments, municipalities and other public administrations (e.g. harbours, authorities and regulatory agencies)	European Union, United Nations, Fab City Global initiative, etc.
International meta-organizations	National governments or representatives of countries	European Union, United Nations, World Health Organization, etc.

Type of meta-organization	Type of members	Examples
Food and agriculture meta-organizations	Food and agriculture sector	Producer organizations, food and agriculture cooperatives
Sports meta-organizations	Sports clubs, associations or federations	Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)
Health meta-organizations	Hospitals, public health organizations, etc.	Partners in paediatrics

Size is also a source of variation. Some meta-organizations gather thousands of members, such as the UN Global Compact, while others only a handful, such as the Global Business Initiatives for Human Rights (Berkowitz 2016a). And in between these two extremes, there is a wide range of possibilities.

Variations in membership composition

Meta-organizations also vary in terms of the 'segmentation' of their membership. Segmentation describes the composition of membership with two or more distinct classes or types of members (see Table 2.5). There is a discernible trend toward the emergence of segmented meta-organizations. This phenomenon is exemplified by multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, as initially explored in the oil and gas industry and subsequently examined in other fields, from ocean governance to supply chain governance, crowdfunding and social innovation (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Carmagnac and Carbone 2019; Saniossian, Beaucourt, and Lecocq 2022; Valente and Oliver 2018).

Single-class meta-organizations are most likely the dominant form of meta-organization. This family includes business meta-organizations, civil society meta-organizations, higher education and science meta-organizations, governmental meta-organizations, sports meta-organizations, and food and agriculture meta-organizations. Federations of associations or syndicates also fall within this single-class family. Historically, single-class meta-organizations appear to be among the oldest type, as observed in my earlier work in the oil and gas

industry (Berkowitz 2016a).

Conversely, other meta-organizations qualify as multi-stakeholder, bringing together two or more distinct types of stakeholders. Bipartite meta-organizations involve two different classes of members. For example, some research and development (R&D) consortia consist of both firms and research centres (Bor 2014). Tripartite meta-organizations gather three classes of organizations from among corporations, universities, civil society, governments or public administrations. This is the case for the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). This meta-organization brings together corporations from the mining and oil and gas industries, local civil society NGOs and governments (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz et al. 2017). The Fair Labor Association (FLA), which gathers universities, civil society and corporations in the retail sector, is another example (Berkowitz 2018). There can also be quadripartite meta-organizations, which gather four distinct types of players—in most instances economic players, universities, civil society and public administration. Examples include Catalan fisheries co-management committees (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020) and the UN Global Compact (Kell 2013). We could even consider quinquepartite meta-organizations (with territories as stakeholders) or more. This configuration has been explored in the context of quintuple-helix innovation, particularly in cases such as living labs or innovation ecosystems (Baccarne et al. 2016; Carayannis et al. 2018).

Table 2.5. Possible profiles of meta-organizations based on membership segmentation. Source: the author.

Type	**Segmentation**	**Examples**
Single class or monopartite meta-organization	A single class of members such as firms, NGOS, hospitals and universities.	Business groups, cooperatives, producer organizations, trade associations, NGO associations, League of European Research Universities, franchising networks
Bipartite meta-organization	Two types of members (e.g. firms and universities)	Some R&D consortia
Tripartite meta-organization	Three types of members among for instance corporations, universities, civil society and public sphere	EITI (corporations, civil society NGOs and governments) Fair Labour association (universities, civil society and corporations)

Type	Segmentation	Examples
Quadripartite meta-organization	Four types of members (including for instance corporations, universities, civil society and public sphere)	Fisheries co-management committees in Catalunya (fishing associations, public administration, civil society and universities) UN Global Compact (several actors from the public sphere, civil society, economic and scientific worlds)
Quinquepartite meta-organization	All of the above in addition to 'territories', regions or local ecosystems as a local stakeholder participating to the meta-organization	Rural living labs, urban living labs, co-management table in Catalunya

Highly segmented meta-organizations could be expected to be less common due to the complexity of aligning organizations with diverse and potentially conflicting interests. However, they can have a significant impact on their members and society, particularly in addressing grand challenges that demand the integration of public, private, civil and scientific interests (Petes et al. 2014).

The implications of this variety in membership composition have yet to be fully understood. What is evident is that meta-organizations exhibit remarkably high diversity and are not necessarily as homogeneous as initially anticipated by Ahrne and Brunsson in 2008. While monopartite meta-organizations are relatively homogeneous, bipartite and other multi-stakeholder meta-organizations may encompass highly heterogeneous and segmented memberships. This is particularly the case for the co-management committees or tables studied in Catalunya (see Berkowitz et al. 2020 and Berkowitz 2023). We can assume that this segmentation of membership reflects the growing needs of contemporary societies, the evolving and increasingly complex nature of not only interests involved but also problems to tackle.

Perimeters of mandates: Scale and scope

This diversity of membership within meta-organizations can be complemented by varying levels or scales and scopes of meta-organizational mandates, which can be understood as the official authority to carry out activities on behalf of members. This connects

with membership scale and scope of mandate, as illustrated in Table 2.6. In relation to scale and scope of mandate, the setting up of the meta-organization itself may also be a source of variation: whether it emerges in a bottom-up manner as a grassroots meta-organization, or is established in a more top-down manner (e.g. with incentives from national or transnational institutions such as the EU—see for instance Karlberg and Jacobsson 2015). Mandates can be organized in a variety of ways in meta-organizations (Bor and Sorsa 2026; Coron, Garaudel, and Schmidt 2026).

Table 2.6. Scale and scope of meta-organizational mandates. Source: Berkowitz (2019).

Reach level/ scope	**Membership scale**	**Examples**
Local	Locally embedded	Catalan fisheries co-management committee
Translocal	Locally embedded but across national boundaries	Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (COICA)
National	At the level of a country, nation-wide	National trade associations
Supra-national/ transnational	Across national or geopolitical frontiers, within a spatially bounded region	Association of Supervisors of Banks of Americas (ASBA), Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI)
International	Global scale	United Nations Global Compact

Meta-organizations can be established to operate at different levels. Some may be highly spatialized, serving as very local meta-organizations, such as the Catalan fisheries co-management committees or the Taula de Co-gestio del Baix Empordà, located on a small zone of the Costa Brava. These committees bring together fishing associations, public administrations, universities and NGOs, with the primary objective of defining sustainable fishing plans at the level of a specific harbour, such as Rosas on the Costa

Brava (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Lleonart et al. 2014). Some meta-organizations may be translocal, such as the COICA, the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (Fernandes and Lopes 2022). Many meta-organizations have a national scope, as is the case for most country-level trade associations, for instance (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz and Dumez 2015; Rajwani, Lawton, and Phillips 2015; Spillman 2018).

Perimeters of issues: Specificity, specialization and sectoralization

Meta-organizations can also be described based on the specificity of the issues they address. This is what I have analysed in the oil and gas industry, distinguishing between issues that are specific to a particular industry or those that are common to multiple industries (Berkowitz et al. 2017 Berkowitz 2019; Berkowitz 2023). In the oil and gas industry, I distinguished between high and low specificity issues (Berkowitz et al. 2017). Here, in Table 2.7, I propose variations in what I refer to as 'mandate specificity' within meta-organizations, distinguishing between industry-specific (or sector-specific) and non-industry-specific (or non-sector-specific) mandates. To this we can add specialization, i.e. specialist and generalist mandates. Specialist mandates present with high specificity around a well framed issue—i.e. addressing a specific problem, such as environmental performance or respect of human rights in the procurement of potential suppliers, with a closed membership and a given set of activities such as services or lobbying only. A generalist mandate on the other hand may come with open category membership, targeting more general issues (i.e. addressing several problems and conducting various activities). Thematic meta-organizations, which I studied in the oil and gas industry, have specialist mandates and closed membership but can be industry-specific or not. Once again, the specificity of a mandate is likely to impact the activities and structure of a meta-organization. This is what Coron et al. (2026) show in feminist movements, where universalist or intersectional collectives with specific vs generalist 'orientations' engage in different activities (service or lobbying).

Table 2.7. Specialization and specificity of meta-organizational mandates and membership. Source: Berkowitz (2019).

Specialization / specificity	**Industry/sector specific (specific problem within a sector)**	**Non-industry/sector specific (transversal issues)**
Specialist mandate: framed issue or specialization of the membership	Thematic meta-organizations such as IPIECA, the global oil and gas association for sustainability issues (Berkowitz et al. 2017), or the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (Carmagnac and Carbone 2019) Thematic multi-stakeholder meta-organizations such as fisheries co-management committees (Berkowitz et al. 2020)	Thematic business-only meta-organizations such as the Global Business Initiative on Human Rights (Berkowitz 2016)
Generalist mandate: open membership, general issues	Cooperatives (Roux and Lecocq 2022), trade associations (Spillman 2018), University associations such as European University Association (Brankovic 2018)	UN Global Compact, World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Berkowitz et al. 2017)

Meta-organizations also vary greatly depending on their sectoral level and degree of sectoralization, i.e. the boundaries of sectors represented or not in the membership. Indeed, their mandate can be undertaken at different sector levels, from high sectoralization—i.e. bound within a given sector—to a low sectoralization—i.e. across two or more sectors—as Table 2.8 summarizes.

Table 2.8. Sectoralization of meta-organizational mandates. Adapted from Berkowitz (2019).

Level	**Sectoralization**	**Definition**	**Examples**
Infra-sectoral, intra-sectoral	High sectoralization	Within a sector, but not encompassing the whole sector	IOGP International Oil and Gas Producers associations (only upstream businesses), League of European Research Universities

Level	Sectoralization	Definition	Examples
Sectoral	High sectoralization	At the sector level, encompassing the whole sector or domain	IPIECA (oil and gas, upstream, midstream, downstream), International Association of Universities Collectif des festivals
Supra-sectoral, inter-sectoral	Low sectoralization	Across two or more sectors with similar characteristics, or across supply chains	Supra sector of extractive industries (EITI), supra sector of marine industries (World Ocean Council), Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)
Cross-sectoral, pluri-sectoral, pan-sectoral	Low sectoralization	More than two industries that share no common attributes	UN Global Compact, World Business Council for Sustainable Development

Infra-sectoral or intra-sectoral meta-organizations operate within a specific sector but do not integrate the whole sector. For example, the International Oil and Gas Producers associations (IOGP) concentrate solely on upstream businesses in the oil and gas industry (Berkowitz et al. 2017). The League of European Research Universities could also belong to this family (Brankovic 2018). Sectoral meta-organizations have a sector-wide scope, encompassing the entire industry or domain. Examples include the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA) which focuses on the oil and gas sector, spanning upstream, midstream and downstream activities (Berkowitz 2016a), or the *Collectif des festivals* of music festivals in France (Mammar El Hadj, Sabbado da Rosa, and Mazzilli 2026), or the International Association of Universities (Brankovic 2018; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020).

Supra-sectoral or inter-sectoral meta-organizations extend their boundaries across two or more sectors with similar characteristics, or even across supply chains. Notable instances include the supra-sector of extractive industries (for the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, EITI, discussed earlier) (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017); the supra-sector of marine industries (World Ocean

Council) (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020); and the value chain of palm oil with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (Carmagnac and Carbone 2019). Cross-sectoral, pluri-sectoral or pan-sectoral meta-organizations transcend traditional sector boundaries and involve more than two industries that do not share any common attributes. Examples include the UN Global Compact and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017). These classifications help to clarify the diverse scopes and orientations of meta-organizations in relation to the sectors they engage with (Alo and Arslan 2023; Garaudel 2020; Saniossian, Beaucourt, and Lecocq 2022) and could be combined with their structural mandates, organization of labour force and resourcing flows (Bor and Almpanopoulou 2026; Bor and Cropper 2023; Bor and Sorsa 2026).

A variety of configurations

These types of membership and boundaries of action can be selectively combined, opening up a great variety of possible configurations, beyond the classification of families and family resemblances in meta-organizations. For instance, business meta-organizations and civil society meta-organizations can act at both ends of the specificity and sectoralization spectrum, ranging from infra-sectoral engagements to cross-sectoral involvements.

Furthermore, when we consider higher education meta-organizations, their scope can span across various geographic dimensions. Some can be confined to national borders while some on the contrary extend to transnational spheres, or even fully global, depending on the nature and objectives of their initiatives. In France, many of them are actually local: this is the case for *Communautés d'Universités et Établissements* (COMUEs), which translates to 'Communities of Universities and Institutions', and which can be understood as meta-organizations. These entities were established by the Law on Higher Education and Research in July 2013, replacing the previous administrative structure known as *Pôle de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES), which had been in place from 2007 to 2013.[1] COMUEs can be conceived as meta-organizations that bring

1 In a sense, one form of meta-organization replaced another. Their different

together multiple universities and higher education institutions under a common administrative and collaborative framework. It is interesting to note that the higher education field, just like sports, seems fraught with meta-organizations (Brankovic 2018; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020), and that the higher education field seems to become increasingly more integrated via meta-organizations.

Multi-stakeholder or multi-class meta-organizations can also present variations in specificity, levels and sectoralization. They may bring together very local and infra-sectoral organizations, addressing specific localized concerns. Or alternatively, they can take on a global mandate and global, multi-stakeholder open membership, yielding influence across multiple sectors in a supra-sectoral capacity.

The low cost structure of meta-organizations makes it easy to establish and operate them (Berkowitz and Dumez 2015, 2016). This results in a self-augmentation of meta-organizations, producing a complex, dynamic and expanding landscape of them, as meta-organizations and meta-meta-organizations continue to be set up to address a variety of problems, old and new. The configurations and possibilities seem infinite, but resources and cognitive attention are not, so this infinity of configurations and proliferation of meta-organizations raises important questions about our capacity to engage with meta-organizations (Alexius 2026).

The significance of meta-organizations for contemporary societies: Roles and activities of meta-organizations

Meta-organizations play important roles in contemporary societies—this is the point of arguing that we live in a society of meta-organizations, not just organizations. They are relatively easy to set up and maintain, they come in many forms and shapes, and they have the capacity to undertake multiple activities which reinforce organizations in society, by reinforcing member organizations internally and reinforcing their place in society (Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026b). Meta-organizations are also extremely diverse in their very purposes—such as facilitating interactions,

structures, objectives and legislation could be worth analysing and comparing to better understand the legal backgrounds of meta-organizations, in the context of evolutions of the meso-level governance of higher education (Musselin 2021).

shaping non-members, managing identities and statutes—and engage in various activities to fulfil these purposes (see Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz et al. 2022; Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026a).

Activities of meta-organizations and their effects on society

Most meta-organizations engage in governance and co-management activities (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz et al. 2022). Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) argue that meta-organizations tend to produce a lot of non-binding rules and standards because they are easier to agree upon for member organizations. As a result, a lot of what meta-organizations do consists in shaping, regulating and managing members' behaviours, by defining, translating or adapting rules at various levels, from the local to the national, transnational and international level. Meta-organizations contribute to shaping legal frameworks or even markets especially, but not only, in the context of socio-ecological transitions (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b; Carmagnac and Carbone 2019; Peixoto and Temmes 2019). Multi-stakeholder meta-organizations in particular play an important in self-regulating members through consensus and jointly taken decisions (Berkowitz 2016a; 2023b; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Dumez 2015). In that sense, meta-organizations create, maintain and shape decided social order among organizations.

Thus, one important activity of meta-organizations is advocacy, i.e. representing and defending the interests of members (Berkowitz et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2017; Rajwani, Lawton, and Phillips 2015; Spillman 2018). Advocacy activities include lobbying, negotiating prices, contracts and regulations, but also raising awareness and influencing stakeholders on specific issues. Because they often lack control and sanction mechanisms, and because they largely function by consensus, meta-organizations tend to rely on 'outreach' strategies, where meta-level actors or members raise awareness and nudge members and non-members in order to diffuse rules or to achieve their collective goals (Berkowitz 2015; Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz and Dumez 2015). Advocacy, and lobbying in particular, illustrates well a 'double bind' mechanism,

or a dual relationality implied by meta-organizations (Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026c): meta-organizations are characterized by a double bind relation with non-members, i.e. both members and meta-level actors interact with non-members, can influence them and can be affected by them. This is very visible in the EU-Mercosur agreement for instance, wherein the automotive industry lobbied the EU both through individual automotive corporations and industry meta-organizations (Fernandes et al. 2026).

Against this backdrop, and to fulfil their purpose of creating identity and status orders but also to facilitate interactions and joint actions, meta-organizations may engage in boundary and category work (Berkowitz et al. 2022). Boundary and category work involves setting organizational boundaries and defining categories for members, taking decisions and communicating internally and externally to establish a collective identity or family name (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Laviolette et al. 2022). Meta-organizations may need to reinforce their collective identity and manage their reputation by addressing the misconduct of certain members, protecting the collective from 'black sheep' (Berkowitz 2016; Berkowitz et al. 2017). Meta-organizations may also help to construct new categories of markets as we showed in the crowdfunding sector, wherein the meta-organization itself (Finance Participative France) prefigured the market, which was not yet legal (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b).

Finally, an important part of what meta-organizations do consists in providing services to their members (Berkowitz and Bor 2018; Berkowitz and Dumez 2016). Services include, for instance, producing and sharing information, statistics, research and organizing training and capacity-building. Some meta-organizations generate revenues by selling information or services to their members, and the nature of these services can vary widely based on the needs and characteristics of the members as well the collective goal of the meta-organizations. This may affect resourcing flows, which vary a lot among meta-organizations (Bor and Cropper 2023). Meta-organizations may also provide infrastructures such as auction houses and transformation plants, as is the case in fishery *cofradías* in Catalunya. These *cofradías*, gathering fishing companies and ship-owners, provide all services necessary to collect, store and sell fish, including reverse auction

houses (Berkowitz et al. 2018). Knowledge sharing, capacity building, workshops and the best sharing practices can occur among members of the meta-organization, but also with non-members and even with other meta-organizations (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024). Indeed, while most works have focused on services provided to members and resourcing within meta-organizations (Bor and Cropper 2023), a recent study shows that these services, especially capacity-building, can occur between one meta-organization and another, through meta-organization-to-meta-organization capacity building (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024).

Logics of actions in meta-organizations

Following Schmitter and Streeck's (1999) arguments, the actions of meta-organizations could be further analysed through two primary logics (see also Berkowitz 2016, 2019): a logic of membership and a logic of influence. Meta-organizations must indeed provide enough services and must adequately structure membership to survive, i.e. to attract and retain members from whom the meta-organizations will be extracting resources. Schmitter and Streeck (1999) label this the logic of membership. On the other hand, the logic of influence describes the necessity for meta-organizations to structure themselves in a way that allows them to influence non-members, such as governments, and extract further resources.

From this, we could add two additional logics: goal-setting and rule-setting (Berkowitz 2016, 2019). The logic of goal-setting describes how members collectively set goals for the meta-level actor (in a more bottom-up approach). On the other hand, the logic of rule-setting also describes how meta-organizations define rules and norms that apply to members (in a more top-down approach). The combination of logics of membership and influence with logics of goal-setting and rule-setting can demarcate categories of meta-organizations with different roles or activities (Berkowitz 2019). Based on some of the main activities defined for meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al. 2022), we can derive a matrix of meta-organizational functions, based on activities and logics (see Fig. 2.1).

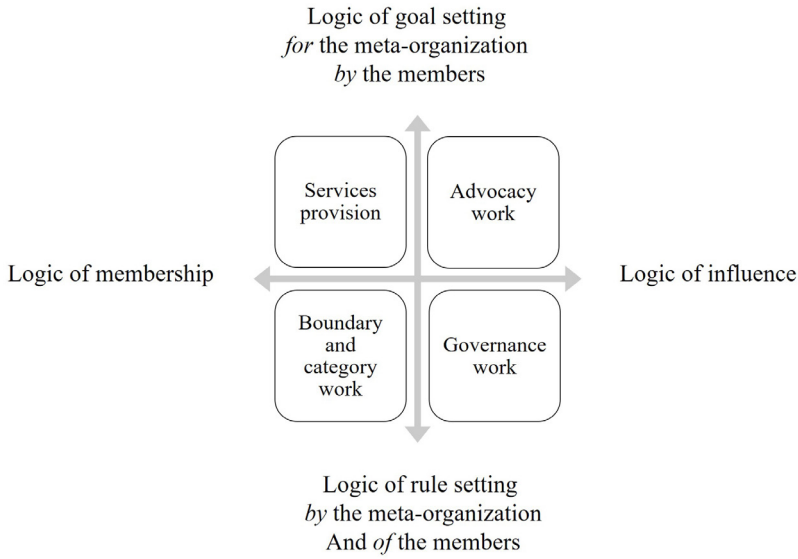

Fig. 2.1. Meta-organizations' functions based on activities and logics of actions. Image adapted from Berkowitz (2019).

Meta-organizations may follow at least two different logics: one logic of goal-setting *for* the meta-organization or rule-setting *by* the meta-organization, and one logic of membership or influence. Meta-organizations' functions may vary depending on their logics and activities.

Some meta-organizations may primarily achieve one function, e.g. standard organizations do governance work, combining a logic of influence with a logic of rule-setting. As argued previously, governing meta-organizations are mostly driven by influence and rule-setting, through governance work (Berkowitz et al. 2020). Certain meta-organizations such as the International Council for the Exploration of the sea (ICES), which produce knowledge for members, fulfil logics of membership and goal-setting for the meta-organization (Rachlitz, Grothe-Hammer, and Bailey 2023). However, some meta-organizations may combine functions and articulate all logics (Berkowitz 2019). This is typically the case for Finance Participative France, which conducted all types of activities and acted as a market organizer, as was shown in the crowdfunding sector in France (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019).

Returning to the previously identified categories of meta-

organizations, or rather the dimensions to base typologies on, we still lack an in-depth understanding of patterns and trends in the great variety of meta-organizations. For instance, how do domains relate to activities and segmentations? Is there a relation between these dimensions of meta-organizations and further dimensions of internal organization that I will discuss in later sections? These remain open questions.

Conclusion

Meta-organizations are an important empirical phenomenon. They are qualitatively and quantitatively important. They are also extremely varied in size, governance form, types of members, membership segmentation, mandate perimeters, but also purposes, activities and logics. These families and family resemblances only begin to show how diverse meta-organizations can be as an empirical phenomenon. What they do clearly show is that meta-organizations, beyond their incredibly high diversity (and therefore dissimilarities), can also present with some commonalities or similarities. This hints at the analytical value of meta-organizations as a concept, the topic of the next chapter.

3. The Conceptual Specificities of the Society of Meta-Organizations

When Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) introduced the concept of meta-organization, their main argument was that most approaches fell short in understanding some specific aspects of meta-organizations. Notably, being a meta-organization has significant implications for the functioning of the meta-level actors and the interactions between members and meta-level actors. In this chapter, I focus more on meta-organizations as a concept and the resulting methodological challenges and possibilities for developing a meta-organizational analytical perspective.

Meta-organizations are organizations—they are established and maintained through decisions (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008, 2011) and are acknowledged as social actors (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025; Berkowitz and Bor 2024). As such, meta-organizations differ from network and institutions, which both constitute non-decided social orders that emerge more organically through repeated interactions or are taken for granted (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008, 2011) and may or may not be constituted as a social actor (Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026c). This has implications for decision-making processes, layering and multi-levelness of social orders in meta-organizations (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Bor 2018, 2022, 2024).

The second important characteristic is that members of meta-organizations are themselves organizations, not individuals (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). This makes meta-organizations intrinsically different from individual-based organizations such as associations, firms, clubs, social movements, communities or bureaucracies. This has implications, for instance, for actorhood or collective identity (see

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among others, Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Bor 2022; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022). Members—whether firms, non-governmental organizations, hospitals or states, among others—possess their own collective identities, specific resources, strategies, logics, values, norms, autonomy and organizational actorhood (or not), all of which exert an influence on the meta-organization, and vice versa. Indeed, the nature of members as organizations affects the meta-organization's constitution, its ability to attract, renew and retain members, to take collective decisions and be held accountable for them, to create and develop a cohesive meta-level identity (referred to as the 'family name' by Ahrne and Brunsson 2008) and effectively make sense of diverse interests while externally representing its members, but also to affect members in return.

The third characteristic is that meta-organizations are generally voluntary associations, meaning that members choose to come together and to collaborate (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). This has several implications: 1) this voluntary association enables members to internalize the environment of organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008); 2) it also leads to specific decision-making processes, coordination mechanisms and forms, with an emphasis on heterarchy and consensus (Berkowitz and Dumez 2016; Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025; Lupova-Henry and Dotti 2022; Saniossian, Lecocq, and Beaucourt 2022); 3) it shifts the emphasis from competition to collaboration, or at least coopetition (i.e. the combined advantages of cooperation and competition), sometimes displacing the centre of gravity of competition from members to meta-organizations themselves (Azzam and Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020); and 4) it makes it much easier for members to exit (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz and Dumez 2016).

These defining features of meta-organizations as a concept raise specific methodological challenges. How do we study meta-organizations? Whom do we consult? How do we actually get the collective identities, the strategies, the decisions of the meta-level actor, and how do we unravel the intertwining of social orders in meta-organizations? As mentioned previously, meta-organizations are a black box, and they have no standardized obligation to report. So how do we access them, and when we access a meta-organization, what is it we are getting access to exactly?

The concept of meta-organization can be operationalized in a 'meta-organizational lens'. This lens serves as an analytical approach to study certain phenomena and especially their dynamics, and to approach meta-organizations through certain proxies, as I will discuss.

Why do meta-organizations matter as a dedicated concept?

For more than two decades now, the simple definition proposed for meta-organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008) has represented a major break from several dominant discourses, which usually exhibit one of two tendencies, as mentioned in the introduction of this book: 1) treating meta-organizations as if they were individual-based organizations, and 2) treating meta-organizations as if they were constituted of non-decided social orders, that is to say networks or institutions (Berkowitz et al. 2022). Non-decided (or emergent) social orders are those that emerge spontaneously through unplanned interactions, i.e. networks (Goffman 1966), or emerge slowly through time and the reproduction of unquestioned behaviours, i.e. institutions (Jepperson 1991).

One first tendency in dominant approaches in management, economics, sociology of organizations, political science and international relations, among other disciplines, consists in treating meta-organizations like their 'conventional', individual-based counterparts. In doing so, academics have looked at meta-organizations through theories developed for organizations made of individuals (often focusing on the secretariat of meta-organizations). This is the central initial argument of Ahrne and Brunsson. While these works have brought valuable insights, they have failed to reflect on the particular implications of having an organization on top of and constituted by other organizations.

The second tendency has been to treat meta-organizations as inherently non-organizational phenomena such as networks or institutions. As such, these works have often overlooked the organizationality of this phenomenon. The concept of meta-organizations, on the other hand, has provided us with the basic and yet fundamental insight that part of the environments of organizations are often just other forms of organization (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005, 2008). The distinctive nature—or peculiar ontology—of meta-organization (Berkowitz 2019) gives rise to several

challenges: concerning autonomy, the actorhood of meta-organizations, decision-making processes, and their impacts or effects, among others. This is precisely why the concept of meta-organization proves to be useful.

What exactly is the status of the concept?

What theoretical phenomena or concepts fall under the umbrella of meta-organizations? Well-researched examples of meta-organizations, and the main concepts used in literature on them, include trade associations (Bradley 1965; König, Schulte, and Enders 2012; Rajwani, Lawton, and Phillips 2015), multi-partner alliances (Berkowitz and Bor 2018; Das 2015), federations (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025; Provan 1983), standard organizations (Boström 2006), multi-stakeholder initiatives (Mena and Palazzo 2012; Rasche 2012; Saniossian, Lecocq, and Beaucourt 2022), cooperatives (Roux and Lecocq 2022; Sharfman, Shaft, and Anex 2009) or international organizations (Chaudhury et al. 2016; Garaudel 2020; Kerwer 2013; Koch 2024; Roger and Dauvergne 2016). We saw previously the diversity of empirical phenomena that could be studied as meta-organizations.

Ahrne, Brunsson and Kewer's (2016) paper is the poster child of positioning the concept with regard to existing literatures and showing the novel perspectives that the concept can offer. The authors contrast the other dominant approaches in international relations (principal-agent theory and bureaucratic organization theory) with the concept of meta-organization. They show well that the value of using the concept of meta-organization lies in the theoretical implications that result from the meta-organizational nature or 'intrinsic' dimensions of meta-organizations, e.g. multi-level meta-organizational coopetition (Azzam and Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020).

But this further raises the question of the status and relation of the concept of meta-organization with regards to these other strands of literature. It is interesting to think of it in two ways: both as an overarching or umbrella approach (therefore potentially encompassing all these strands) and at the same time as a distinctive conceptual approach that can yield novel insights about phenomena. This dual status of the concept allows multiple uses, especially across disciplines and fields, and therefore facilitates or even encourages pluridisciplinarity. Indeed,

as an analytical tool, meta-organization can be viewed as a boundary concept that can be easily exported to other fields and disciplines, thus enabling joint discussion. This has been done for instance in international relations (Kerwer 2013; Koch 2024), marine policy (Berkowitz et al. 2020) or in economics (Promsopha, Berkowitz, and Guirou 2022). Within management studies, the concept can be fruitfully applied to a wide range of literatures, from transition studies to innovation management, among others. But the concept's dual status also comes with the risk of failing to consolidate knowledge, either due to the neglect of past contributions (from literature on organized networks, for instance) or due to conceptual dispersion and fragmentation (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025).

Methodological challenges of studying meta-organizations

The distinctiveness of the concept of meta-organizations also comes with some methodological challenges. The previous chapter highlighted a methodological problem with attempting to assess the number of meta-organizations related to or including members from the oil and gas sector. This shows the complexity of studying, mapping and analysing meta-organizations, because making an inventory is challenging. There is no global or even national or regional database. Meta-organizations generally have little to no obligation for transparency and therefore produce little standardized, findable and interoperable information about themselves—which I will call here 'meta-data about meta-organizations'. The lack of meta-data about meta-organizations makes it incredibly challenging to develop a good understanding of their quantitative importance, but also to study them and compare them. Studies predominantly use in-depth, single cases with an industry-level as entry points (e.g. oil and gas, crowdfunding, cider industry, oil palm, cultural industries) because this allows collective action dynamics to be followed (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b; Carmagnac and Carbone 2019; Duprat, Baret, and Mendez 2023; Laviolette et al. 2022; Mammar El Hadj, Sabbado da Rosa, and Mazzilli 2026). There are few comparative studies (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Chaudhury et al. 2016), few quantitative studies

(Brankovic 2018; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020) and no study using mixed methods.

This dominance of qualitative methodologies also relates to another issue with the very nature of meta-organizations. How do we address a meta-organization? Whom do we speak to when we want to speak to a meta-organization? How do we develop a processual approach to study meta-organizations as embedded processual entities, combining multi-level decided and non-decided orders? In-depth qualitative research with field work and interviews with various individuals in the meta-organization can represent different perspectives precisely and help us to reconstruct or attempt to access meta-organizationality on various conceptual grounds, i.e. dialectical actorhood, collective identity, expertise, responsibility issues at the meta-level (Alexius 2026; Berkowitz 2015; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024; Coulombel and Barron 2024; Cropper and Bor 2018; Gibel, Überbacher, and Scherer 2025; Laviolette et al. 2022; Mammar El Hadj, Sabbado da Rosa, and Mazzilli 2026). Websites and secondary data such as reports and archives can provide interesting entry points for analysis and proxies for collectively constructed narratives and identities (Berkowitz 2016, 2018; Berkowitz et al. 2017; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). Official decisions and votes can also serve in the analysis of meta-organizations, enabling a search for tipping points and critical junctures where new sequences emerged (Baldi 2024; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024).

Epistemologically, several elements are notable. First of all, it is difficult to know who thinks for the meta-organization and yet because the meta-organization is an entity, there must be an agent who makes decisions, has actorhood and can be held accountable (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Brunsson 2024). In the gap between who represents and who acts for the meta-organization, and whom it represents and whom it acts for, emerge the fascinating tensions within meta-organizations: between member organizations with individual representatives (Alexius 2026; Sjöstedt 2024), and the meta-level actor (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025). There is a meta-level actor, and there are always members, but actorhood and collective identity are constantly negotiated, challenged and processually constructed, and maybe never fully successful. From the perspective of members, it is not surprising

to note that some members do not even know the full extent of the membership portfolio (as in the case of a French oil and gas corporation, see Berkowitz 2015). This is to be expected in the context of engagement overload and the multiplication of meta-organizations (Alexius 2026). In these cases of multinational or transnational corporations with dozens of meta-organizations participating (if not more), it is not always the same people that represent their organization within its meta-organization, and nobody keeps track of meta-organizational membership (Berkowitz 2015). With the self-augmentation of meta-organizations and decided social orders, this raises important questions for the functioning of societies.

Developing a meta-organizational analytical perspective

So, how should the concept of meta-organizations be used and applied? In response to these methodological challenges, several works attempted to operationalize the concept by developing a meta-organizational analytical perspective, or meta-organizational lens, to look at certain phenomena in relation to meta-organizations and derive insights from the approach (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Bor 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b, 2024; Coulombel and Barron 2024; Lupova-Henry, Blili, and Dal Zotto 2021). This involves considering the ontology of meta-organizations, i.e. their specific attributes, to understand what it means in concrete terms to study certain phenomena as meta-organizations. Such a meta-organizational lens might be fruitful to analyse processual dynamics, meta-organizational transformations over the long term, but also tensions among members and meta-level actors around actorhood and identity, among other topics. As an analytical lens, meta-organization can be combined with other theoretical or conceptual frameworks from other fields, as I will explain.

Analysis of evolutionary dynamics

The meta-organizational lens enables the development of long-term studies of meta-organizations and the analysis of their evolutionary

dynamics, for instance in crowdfunding and ocean governance (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2017, 2019b, 2024). The framework can be used to identify not only phases where meta-organizations disclosed different parameters or characteristics, but also the tipping points or critical junctures themselves (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2017, 2019b, 2024; Saniossian, Beaucourt, and Lecocq 2022). These tipping points could be special events or decisions.

In the French FinTech sector, for instance, we analysed the evolution of meta-organizations as devices of sectoral governance in response to successive innovations over nearly thirty years (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024). We argued that successive innovations create multiple technologically-induced governance gaps that meta-organizations can fill. The sheer speed of technological innovation itself increases the rate of technological disruption. This disruption then accelerates the obsolescence of regulators and regulations (Fitzgerald 2018). This obsolescence creates governance gaps which we called 'technologically-induced' governance gaps (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024). We focused on ten collectives, whether in the form of meta-organizations, informal groups or networks of individuals. We identified three different phases with different innovations, intermediaries and individual boundary spanners. What we noticed was that meta-organizations conducted unique activities for a variety of contributors (members, non-members and other meta-organizations) that informal groups or networks could not perform. Meta-organizations participated in co-management or co-regulation activities with members and non-members through advocacy, resulting in the joint production of legislation and self-regulation. Additionally, meta-organizations helped non-members—especially regulators and end users—to increase their own digital competence in the face of innovation. The paper further highlights specific trajectories and situations where meta-organizations evolve or are established, using the term 'meta-organizational filiation' to describe the relations that are created between meta-organizations. Indeed, meta-organizational filiation can occur through incubation, spin-offs, integration, mergers and direct transfer. This filiation is enacted through meta-organization-to-meta-organization capacity building.

Combining meta-organization with other concepts or literatures

Another merit of the concept of meta-organization is that it can be fruitfully combined with other concepts. Some have done so with institutionalist theory (Coulombel and Barron 2024; Rogerson, Grosvold, and Crane 2025; Young 2021), even though this raises epistemological issues given the opposing motivations behind the establishment of these two concepts (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). Institutionalist theory emerged to explain how institutional pressures shape and homogenize organizational behaviours, thus producing social conformity through legitimacy dynamics and taken-for-granted practices. Meanwhile, meta-organization theory emerged precisely to draw attention to decided attempts to create order within and among organizations. Combining the two might therefore be intrinsically contradictory. Other works have combined meta-organization with complexity theory to study dynamics in meta-organizational teams (Solansky, Beck, and Travis 2014); with intellectual capital to study its flow in harbours (Vale, Branco, and Ribeiro 2016); with corporate social responsibility (CSR) to analyse the roles of meta-organizations in collectively designing CSR strategies (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017); with resource dependency theory to study resourcing flows of meta-organizations (Bor and Cropper 2023); or with Luhmann system theory to study the functional differentiation in and of meta-organizations (Grothe-Hammer and Rachlitz 2025; Rachlitz, Grothe-Hammer, and Bailey 2026). Meta-organization as a concept is therefore sometimes treated as a background or a context, wherein other theoretical dynamics may unravel. As a concept, meta-organization is well suited to such analytical exercises, although it risks contributing to conceptual inflation as one could imagine many more combinations, e.g. with strategy-as-practice or with social evaluation.

In particular, the concept of meta-organization fruitfully resonates with a growing focus on organized intermediaries. Various literatures from different disciplines (particularly innovation studies, transition studies and regulatory governance) indeed study and emphasize the importance of organized, intermediary action. These intermediaries can be organizations or meta-organizations. For instance, an expanse of literature in innovation studies has looked at innovation intermediaries (Agogué et al. 2017; Howells 2006; Lee et al. 2010; Rossi et al. 2021; Stewart and Hyysalo 2008). The notion of innovation

intermediaries describes both various types of organizations that contribute to innovation diffusion and diverse processes of innovation intermediation (Howells 2006). Agogué et al. (2017) describe innovation intermediaries' core functions as connecting and engaging actors, managing potential conflicts of interests and stimulating innovation. At the crossroads of political science, management and regulatory governance, several scholars emphasize the importance of intermediaries in regulatory processes, or 'regulatory intermediaries' (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017; Brès, Mena, and Salles-Djelic 2019; Ciornei et al. 2023; Hysing and Du Rietz Dahlström 2024; Jordana 2017; Medzini and Levi-Faur 2023). Regulatory intermediaries may diffuse, transpose or transform policies or norms. Transition studies also argue that intermediation is increasingly necessary for the transformation of socio-technical systems and of relationships between actors (Kivimaa et al. 2019). In that perspective, transition intermediaries allow for tackling resistance to change and creating the conditions for successful market disruption (Kivimaa 2014; Mignon and Kanda 2018).

Some of these regulatory, innovation or transition intermediaries are organizations made up of individuals, such as public agencies (Rossi, Caloffi, et al. 2021). Some are even single individuals, such as architects (Horne and Dalton 2014). Others are actually meta-organizations (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz et al. 2023; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024; Bor and O'Shea 2022; Radnejad, Vredenburg, and Woiceshyn 2017; Saniossian, Beaucourt, and Lecocq 2022). Meta-organizations as intermediaries may have been studied previously in the context of industry associations (Dalziel 2006; Watkins et al. 2015), organized and structured networks (Lee et al. 2010; Van Lente et al. 2003), organized inter-organizational collaborations, interactions between firms and innovation communities (Lauritzen 2017) and other forms of membership-based organizations (Kant and Kanda 2019), but few works have explicitly focused on meta-organizations as intermediaries.

Meta-organizations can therefore be conceived as regulatory intermediaries, innovation intermediaries, transition intermediaries or even localization intermediaries (see Mazzilli et al. 2026). First,

constituting regulatory intermediaries in an almost self-evident function of meta-organizations (Berkowitz 2016b; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2017, 2019b). With this perspective, the meta-organizational lens can be applied to various literature on sectoral governance (Cohen and Sundararajan 2015; King and Lenox 2000; Sundararajan 2016) and regulatory governance (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017; Brès, Mena, and Salles-Djelic 2019; Djelic and Quack 2018; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson 2006; Hysing and Du Rietz Dahlström 2024; Levi-Faur and Jordana 2005; Medzini and Levi-Faur 2023). Meta-organizations functioning as regulatory intermediaries may contribute to the (self-)regulation of members through partial meta-organizing. Meta-organizations, by nature, favour standardization and soft law and are therefore well equipped to act as regulatory intermediaries towards their members. They also actively conduct advocacy and can well represent collective interests towards non-members, such as regulators. They are indeed often regulatory intermediaries that seek to affect regulatory frameworks. These meta-organizations may challenge or at least question the role of the state and of politics. In cases of technologically induced governance gaps, meta-organizations may help to boost the capacity of regulators to understand and regulate innovation, but the frontier between capacity building and lobbying can be blurry and can easily lead to regulatory captures (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024). Thus, meta-organizations can also act as innovation intermediaries (Berkowitz 2018; Radnejad, Vredenburg, and Woiceshyn 2017) and can have an important capacity-building role in this context. Under certain conditions, non-members enhance the role of meta-organizations as innovation intermediaries and meta-organizations can serve as innovation intermediaries for not only members, but also non-members and other meta-organizations (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024). Meta-organizations can also mediate development aid in local territories, orchestrating ecosystems of local organizations and empowering them (Mazzilli et al. 2026). Finally, meta-organizations can act as sustainability transition intermediaries (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz et al. 2023; Berkowitz and Bor 2024; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2024).

Conclusion

The concept of meta-organization as introduced by Ahrne and Brunsson has represented a major break from several dominant discourses, which usually exhibit one of two tendencies: 1) treating meta-organizations as if they were individual-based organizations, and 2) treating meta-organizations as if they were non-decided social orders—that is to say networks or institutions. Owing to their specific characteristics, meta-organizations are a valuable concept, yet they raise methodological challenges. The concept has been developed into an analytical framework to unpack its specificities and to operationalize it. This analytical lens can be used to study the processual dynamics of meta-organizations. It can be combined with other literature and approaches, in particular with literature on organized intermediaries.

4. Theorizing Meta-Organizations and Social Orders

Moving beyond the empirical and conceptual value of meta-organizations, various studies have begun to develop a theory of meta-organization. A growing body of literature has contributed to this effort by focusing on the theoretical implications of meta-organizations being decided social orders and especially being layered, multi-level decided social orders (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Hallström 2007; Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz and Bor 2018; Bor and Cropper 2023; Cropper and Bor 2018; Garaudel 2024; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022; Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024; Gustafsson and Hallström 2019; Lupova-Henry, Blili, and Dal Zotto 2021; Rachlitz, Grothe-Hammer, and Bailey 2026; Roux and Lecocq 2022). Here the notion of social order refers to the general 'ordering' of society, that is to say social structures, rules or hierarchies that make the world somewhat predictable (Johnson 2000; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022). Emergent social orders are those that emerge spontaneously through unplanned interactions, typically in networks (Goffman 1966), or emerge slowly over time through the mechanical reproduction of behaviours that have become unquestioned, typically in institutions (Jepperson 1991).

In this chapter, I am outlining an overarching, multi-dimensional theoretical approach to social orders (and that includes meta-organizations) based on a view of decisions as constitutive of organizationality (Berkowitz, Berthod, and Grothe-Hammer 2024; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022). I am describing and articulating five main dimensions: 1) infra-organizationality, which deals with fundamental parameters of social orders, such as ontology and changeability; 2) structural organizationality, which covers structural

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components of a decided order, such as membership, authority, rules, monitoring and sanctions; 3) entitative organizationality, which deals with attributes of organizational entities, namely actorhood, collective identity and interconnected decision making systems; 4) contextual organizationality, which refers to contextual aspects of social orders and combines temporality, territoriality and professionality; and 5) meta-organizationality, which pertains to intrinsic attributes of meta-organizations, understood more broadly in the sense of the layering and embedding of social orders.

This framework may shed a different light on whether and how social orders can change, paving the way to understanding the emergence of organizational 'monsters' and the roles of meta-organizations as spaces with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic dynamics (covered in the next chapter).

The decisional perspective on social orders

Meta-organizations: The social order perspective

It is interesting to note here that since the pioneer works of Ahrne and Brunsson, we have witnessed the development of two different streams (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Bor 2018; Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025). One stream, mostly anchored in organization studies, draws on Ahrne and Brunsson's work and uses a bounded definition of meta-organization. Another stream, mostly anchored in management and strategy, draws on an introduction to a special issue of the *Strategic Management Journal*, by Gulati et al. (2012). This started as a 'territorial' conflict of perspectives between two geographical areas of study, a UK-/US-based community and a European one (Berkowitz and Bor 2018). But since then, the communities have expanded, and a recent systematic literature review showed that the geographical boundaries were no longer relevant, as the boundaries were more conceptual (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025). While both communities use the same term, their definitions of meta-organizations as well as the empirical phenomena they study differ greatly. The strategic/management perspective studies more 'informal' or unorganized meta-organizations such as entrepreneurial ecosystems

or platforms, which the other stream specifically excludes from their definition of meta-organizations because they are not organized and have no meta-level actor (Berkowitz et al. 2022).

The divergence of these communities could be problematic, as the strategic/management perspective—on ecosystems, platforms, — tends to ignore the organization studies approach, and some works borrow from both approaches without taking into account what is commensurable and what is not. Coulombel and Berkowitz (2025) argue that this divide poses many risks to knowledge production. One risk is obviously fragmentation and the lack of consolidation of knowledge. By ignoring each other and evolving in silos, research streams risk producing redundant or contradictory knowledge. This becomes an issue if no attempt is made at discussing, contrasting and consolidating the knowledge. In this age where novel, groundbreaking research gets a premium, nobody does consolidation nor replication work. There is also a risk of irrelevance, which could happen when the concept of meta-organization is no longer useful to understand social phenomena because it is being applied to anything and everything. Another, third risk of theoretical misfits has been identified. This refers to authors extrapolating theory inadequately or drawing problematic conclusions based on incommensurable frameworks. The growing trend of 'hybrid' papers, which draw on both streams indiscriminately, is increasingly posing this risk.

Coulombel and Berkowitz (2025) thus propose to distinguish between meta-organizations as 'meta-level actors', rooted in the organizational perspective, and meta-organizations as 'orchestrated systems', rooted in the management perspective. They further differentiate between two main ways of meta-organizing social order, i.e. creating decided, organized order among organizations.

Meta-organizing can occur through collectively decided social orders, where the collective of organizations (the meta-level actor) is the centre of authority and is making the joint decision. This 'non-directed' or collective meta-organizing process produces a decided social order that can also be conceived as collaborative. Conversely, meta-organizing can also occur through orchestrated decided social orders, i.e. social orders that are decided by one architect in particular. These social orders are 'directed', that is to say orchestrated, by one organization in particular.

This perspective on meta-organizing is deeply rooted in a specific view of social orders, based on an organizational understanding of 'decisions'.

A decisional organization theory, or decisionalism

The question of social orders has often been approached through binaries, distinguishing between emergent or spontaneous 'grown' social orders on the one hand, i.e. networks, and 'made' social orders that are purposefully constructed through decisions on the other, i.e. organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011; Laamanen et al. 2020; von Hayek 1991). This binary of constructed and organic orders, or intentional and non-intentional orders, has been repeatedly used in the social sciences (Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024). This dichotomy means that order can actually emerge without human planning, as "products of human action, not human design" (A. Ferguson, cited in Horwitz 2007, p. 1).

Being a 'decided order' in the words of Ahrne and Brunsson means that decisions are the core component of the organization, as their primary mode of stabilization and continuation. As such, we will regard decisions as constitutive of organizations, diverging from another approach found in the works of Simon and March, for instance (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). Further, decisions may become premises for new decisions (Luhmann 2005), either within certain systems or even within other, connected systems.

There have been many attempts at theorizing organizations and decisions, especially from a practical, situational perspective. This perspective can challenge the rational choice perspective in showing why organizations or decision-makers are prevented from taking rational decisions (Cabantous, Gond, and Johnson-Cramer 2010; Germain and Lacolley 2012; Journé and Raulet-Croset 2012).

In Cyert and March's (1963) *Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, organizations are perceived as coalitions of actors with varying interests, with a bounded rationality approach. Decision-making then appears to be a process of satisfying these interests rather than maximizing or optimizing them. Allison (1971), on the other hand, proposed a political approach, with three different models to explain the Cuban crisis: the Rational Policy Model, the Organizational Process Model, and the Bureaucratic

Politics Model. The first model—dominant at the time—regards decisions as reasonable acts depending on strategic problems (in this case, the Soviet installation of missiles in Cuba). The second model pertains to organizational processes and regards decisions as emerging from standard procedures and routines (not from a centralized, rational, calculating actor). In the last model, decisions are the consequence of negotiation, diplomacy and bargaining powers among different political actors. In France, Crozier and Friedberg are famous for their work on organizations as phenomena of power (Crozier and Friedberg 1977; Friedberg 1993). Power dynamics prevent actors, as decision units, from making rational choices, thus leading to the development of strategic actions.

Lindblom (1979) developed an alternative political view on decisions, called 'incrementalism'. Incrementalism suggests that decision-makers avoid making comprehensive, disruptive (rational) decisions that would seek to maximize outcomes. Rather, decisions are incremental and are based on the current status quo, or how much others will agree with the decisions—not on the objectives they serve. According to Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependence theory, organizations must obtain resources to survive. This may lead to power dependencies between organizations and other constituents. In this perspective, decisions are the result of tensions between the need to manage these dependencies or the need for external control and the need to maintain autonomy.

Developing yet another different perspective, Mintzberg and his colleagues also contributed to the analysis of decisions and organizations in terms of configurations of structure and control (Langley et al. 1995; Mintzberg 1979; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Theoret 1976). Their work also started from a critique of the purely rational model of decisions. They emphasize the importance of power and negotiations, but also the emergence of strategy from practices at grassroots levels. Other alternative perspectives may include Cohen, March and Olsen's (1972) garbage can model, which departs from rational decision-making and views organizations as 'garbage cans', i.e. anarchies. Decisions then appear to be the result of four independent dimensions—problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities—coming together in what the authors call 'organized anarchies'.

Some organization studies and meta-organization studies base their discussions on a somewhat different approach to and understanding

of decisions than these (succinctly introduced) perspectives (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Apelt et al. 2017; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019a; Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Grothe-Hammer 2019b; Nielsen 2018). Here, a decision is not understood as a 'choice' in its psychological dimension, nor as a social event or purely as a strategic or power issue, but as a type of communication that describes "the way people should act or the distinctions or classifications they should make" (Ahrne and Brunsson 2019, p. 7; Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022; Luhmann 2018; Schoeneborn et al. 2014). Decisions therefore have special characteristics as a type of communication, distinguishing them from other social or communication events. Notably, they communicate their own "contingency" (Seidl 2005):

> What is particular about decisions is that they are 'compact communications', which communicate their own contingency ('contingency' here in the sense of 'also possible otherwise'). In contrast to an ordinary communication, which only communicates a specific content that has been selected (e.g., 'I love you'), a decision communication communicates also–explicitly or implicitly–that there are alternatives that could have been selected instead (e.g., 'I am going to employ candidate A and not candidate B') (Seidl 2005, p. 39; cited in Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022).

Decisions indeed implicitly or explicitly communicate discarded alternatives (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). Decisions are therefore inherently paradoxical, and can be understood as 'attempts', as Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) put it, because they simultaneously close and open meaning (Grothe-Hammer and Schoeneborn 2019). Further, decisions provide immediateness, specificity and accountability, something no other form of social order can do (Ahrne and Brunsson 2019; Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). However, decisions also generate more decisions (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008, Ahrne and Brunsson, 2019). When an organizational decision is taken, it requires taking more decisions to interpret, de-paradoxify, or further implement, monitor and sanction compliance with decisions over time.

In this sense, decisions as a constitutive feature of social orders are self-augmenting: each decision not only generates order—structures social orders—but also expands it. Organizations grow and reproduce themselves through decisions and communications of decisions (as

described in the Communication as Constitutive of Organization school). But this pattern extends beyond and outside of formal organizations, with organizing and meta-organizing reinforcing itself and proliferating. Meta-organizations therefore intensify the self-augmentation of social orders: decisions made at the meta-level generate further decisions both within and beyond the boundaries of the meta-organizations. Understanding how decisions act as self-augmenting devices of social orders—especially outside of formal organizations—raises important theoretical questions about organization, organizing and what is being organized.

Against this backdrop, a decisional theory of organizations has started to emerge in recent management and organization studies (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Berkowitz, Berthod, and Grothe-Hammer 2024; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022; Gustafsson and Hallström 2019; Hussenot 2021; Michel 2024). Taken together, these works emphasize the importance of decisions to understanding social orders. They attempt to renew organization studies by positioning decisions at the core of organizations and society (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Apelt et al. 2017; Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020). To this end, decisional organization theory or decisionalism brings together works based on Luhmann's systems theory (Luhmann 2018; Peng and Chanut 2017), the concepts of partial organization and meta-organization (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Gadille, Tremblay, and Vion 2013; Gimet and Grenier 2018; Leys and Joffre 2014), and the concept of organizationality (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Grenier and Denis 2017; Hussenot 2021). These works—i.e. those based on Luhmann's modern systems theory, the concepts of partial organization and meta-organization, and the concept of organizationality—have in common a specific shared definition of decisions as paradoxical communication about how people should act or what distinctions or classifications they should make, as explained above (Ahrne and Brunsson 2019; Ahrne et al. 2016; Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Luhmann 2018).

Decisionalism conceives the organization as "an important phenomenon in modern society, i.e. that of de-paradoxifying decisions by creating decision-based social orders" (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022, p. 35). The objective in developing such a theoretical overarching approach is to better differentiate so-called formal organizations from

other forms of more or less organized social orders, thus opening up organizational analysis to a wide range of social phenomena. This approach does so without neglecting so-called formal organizations, while allowing for a theory of society (Apelt et al. 2017). Through the lens of decisionalism, organization is a multi-level and processual system of decisions constituting decided and interlocking social orders, with two facets: a decided structure and a processual entity. On this basis, Grothe-Hammer et al. (2022) therefore distinguish between and articulate two dimensions—structural organizationality and entitative organizationality—based on the argument that social orders are simultaneously structural and processual entities (Ahrne et al. 2016; Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Luhmann 2018).

Structural organizationality refers to the degree to which organizational elements are used in a social order, focusing on the structural level of organization: membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanction, i.e. what Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) call organizational components or partial organization (see also Berkowitz and Bor 2022). Structural organizationality implies that the (partial or complete) use of organizational elements contributes to the production of predictability, stability and organizational complexity. Indeed, the use of fundamental organizational components such as membership, hierarchies, rules, monitoring and sanctions generates a degree of expectability in decision-making processes and organizational structure. This degree of expectability and complexity is scalable based on the number and elaboration of organizational elements used, which also connects with the concept of decisionality (see Berkowitz and Bor 2022).

Entitative organizationality, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which a social collective exhibits characteristics related to being a processual entity (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). Entitative organizationality involves three levels that can be partially or completely achieved, like structural organizationality: interconnected decision-making processes, actorhood and collective identity (see Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015). Organizations as processual entities indeed involve interconnected processes of decision-making, reflecting the idea that organizations are decision-based entities. Organizations may also achieve actorhood, i.e. they may constitute a social actor, capable of making decisions independently and being held accountable for

them. Actorhood differs from agency (see Berkowitz et al. 2020). There can be agency without actorhood. Lastly, organizations may present a collective identity, which involves the production of self-descriptions by a collective, communicating what it stands for and leading to the creation of a decided identity (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022; Laviolette et al. 2022; Mammar El Hadj, Sabbado da Rosa, and Mazzilli 2026).

Decisionalism, co-dependence and relationality

Combining both structural and entitative organizationality as a continuum allows for a differentiated and analytical view of social phenomena (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). This also means that any degree of entitative organizationality may feature any degree of structural organizationality, and vice versa. Using such a decision-based approach also means unpacking the paradoxical effects of decisions. Furthermore, as this theory draws on Luhmann, it opens ways to explore the functional equivalence between differently organized social phenomena but also the highly relational dimension of organization in decisionalism (Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024; Rachlitz, Grothe-Hammer, and Bailey 2026).

For instance, in a study of crowdfunding, Berkowitz and Souchaud (2019a) started to unpack the notion of co-dependent organization, proposing an extended co-dependence approach between the crowdfunding platform, project owners, the crowd (or individual investors) and chartered accountants, enabling the 'engineering' of collective intelligence—i.e. its expression, transformation and exploitation. The study explores how decided social orders are created among the various organizations or stakeholders. Each organization makes interdependent decisions about membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions, and these decisions affect the crowdfunding process. Through the inclusion of chartered accountants in this process, the expression of collective intelligence can be engineered and made more reliable for investment decisions. In this paper, decisionalism provides an alternative understanding on platform organizing. Indeed, most earlier literature on the subject had developed a network externalities approach, a partnership logics approach or an agency

perspective (Calme, Onnee, and Zoukoua 2018; Mollick and Nanda 2015). Using an approach based on decisions and the co-dependence of social orders, alternative explanations can be found in the presence of informal veto mechanisms and the failure of the platform to monitor the forum of discussion.

The relation between professional knowledge and decisionalism has been studied mostly in the French context (see Mammar El Hadj et al. 2026). In a narrative literature review, Berkowitz et al. (2024) indeed review the specific contributions of French management and organization studies to decisionalism, namely 1) temporality, 2) territoriality and 3) professionality. Drawing on the French literature (Hussenot 2021; Saives et al. 2018), temporality in decisionalism is defined as a time dimension that both structures social orders and acts as an object of communication and organization (Berkowitz et al. 2024). This also echoes the literature on expanding binaries of social orders, wherein the time dimension is present in the idea of changeability (Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024). Meanwhile, 'territoriality' describes spatial anchorage but also co-evolution and even co-construction between places and social orders, and the way spatiality affects and is affected by organizationality (drawing in particular on François, Hirczak, and Senil 2013; Gadille, Tremblay, and Vion 2013; Hirczak et al. 2019; Mazzilli and Pichault 2018; Peng and Chanut 2017). Lastly, professionality emerges as an important dimension developed in French management and organization studies. Professionality is understood as '*savoir, savoir-faire, savoir-être*' (knowledge, know-how, know-how-to-be) (Berkowitz et al. 2024). Professionality can be further conceived as an ideological, behavioural, intellectual and epistemological position of an individual in relation to the exercise of their profession (Evans 2008). Works highlighting the importance of professionality deal less with skills per se, and more with the organization of a social system around a profession (Grenier and Denis 2017; Henrion 2023; Leys and Joffre 2014; Maisonnasse, Petrella, and Richez-Battesti 2013; Peng and Chanut 2017) or an expertise (Mammar El Hadj et al. 2026).

These three dimensions contribute to decisionalism by showing that organization is not only simultaneously a processual entity and a structure—as an interweaving of decided and non-decided orders—

but is also anchored in space, time and the professionalities that run through the organization. And it is deeply relational. If each dimension (temporality, territoriality, professionality) can present structural organizationality, each dimension can also affect the entitative and structural organizationality of collectives to varying degrees.

One question this raises is whether and how we could integrate structural organizationality, entitative organizationality and these three more contextual dimensions (see Table 4.1). Here, I am suggesting that these dimensions should be brought together under the label 'contextual organizationality', as these dimensions (temporality, territoriality and professionality) both affect structural and entitative organizationality and are affected by it: they are co-constituted.

Table 4.1. Structural, entitative and contextual organizationality. Adapted from Grothe-Hammer (2019), Grothe-Hammer et al. (2022) and Berkowitz et al. (2024).

Structural organizationality	**Entitative organizationality**	**Contextual organizationality**
Membership	Interconnected decision-making	Temporality
Hierarchy	Actorhood	Territoriality
Rules	Collective identity	Professionality
Monitoring		
Sanction		

Working to further decisionalism, and drawing especially on Luhmann (2018), Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024) outline various properties of social orders that contribute to a finer understanding of the complexities and dynamics of social phenomena, especially compared to approaches such as network theory or neo-institutionalism (as synthesized in Table 4.2): ontology, determination, changeability and acceptance. I suggest the addition of density to this. Ontology refers to the specific nature of the order, i.e. whether it is a system (a 'processual entity' in Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022) or a structure (which relates to organizational components). Determination refers to how a social order was established, in a retrospective view. With the property of determination, we seek to distinguish between social orders that

were decided (i.e. organizations), or that emerged organically, in a non-decided manner (what we traditionally understand as networks, prejudice or traditions, for instance). Changeability describes the decidable or non-decidable properties of social orders, i.e. whether they are perceived as potentially changeable or not. This dimension emphasizes the temporal dynamics and changes in social orders. This relates to our paper on the International Whaling Commission and the decidability/non-decidability of social orders (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). The notion of acceptance aims to distinguish between social orders that are (at least at some point in time) accepted, and those social orders that are contested.

I would add to these properties of social order a 'density' dimension, i.e. the degree of decisionality (Berkowitz and Bor 2022) of a social order—that is to say the intensity of decision-making about the structure or the system, thin or thick. In Berkowitz and Bor (2022), decisionality is described as the density of decisions in meta-organizations, leading to thin or thick, more or less partial, meta-organizing. Here I would argue that density applies to decided social orders in general, not only to meta-organizations. There can therefore be thin or thick decisional orders, whether we are looking at organizations or meta-organizations. I would argue that density belongs to the factual dimension of meaning (the 'what'), although it is affected by temporality and can therefore belong to the temporal dimension of meaning, or to the social dimension of meaning as it is highly dependent on who is involved (see Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024).

Table 4.2. Description of the properties of social order. Adapted from Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024).

Properties of social order	**Core question**	**Main distinction**
Ontology	What is the order?	System or structure?
Determination	How was the order determined? (retrospective attribution)	Decided or non-decided?
Changeability or decidability	Can the order be changed? (attribution)	Decidable or non-decidable?
Acceptance	For whom is the social order expected to be valid?	Accepted or contested?
Density or decisionality	To what extent is the social order highly decided upon or not?	Thin or thick decisionality?

Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024) emphasize the constructed, processual and relational nature of social orders in decisionalism. Adding density as a property of social order brings another level of understanding of the distinctions between orders. In the decisionism perspective, this framework provides a multi-dimensional perspective on social orders, challenging oversimplified binary concepts, but also moving beyond networks, institutions and even organizations to some extent. It enables the analysis of tipping points in shifts between characteristics (decided/non-decided, accepted/contested, decidable/non-decidable). The framework also allows complexity to be unpacked in a rather concrete manner, through the examination of different properties of social order and their intersections, allowing for a fine-grained analysis of what could previously be understood as organizations, networks, and institutions. It also allows the identification and description of potential incompatibilities, conflicts or contradictions between different social orders, particularly when diverse social orders converge in one place (cf. the International Whaling Commission, Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022).

From infra- to (meta-)organizationality: An integrated framework

Here, I describe an integrated framework connecting infra-organizationality, contextual organizationality, structural and entitative organizationality and lastly meta-organizationality, which I will present now.

Meta-organizationality

Meta-organization theory intrinsically draws on and adds to decisionalism (Berkowitz and Bor 2024; Michel 2024; Rachlitz, Grothe-Hammer, and Bailey 2026). Meta-organizations are entities with other entities as their members. At the same time, meta-organizations are decided social orders, themselves comprising of and combining other decided (and non-decided) social orders. And meta-organizations further produce social order. Meta-organizationality describes the specific organizational attributes of a meta-organization, resulting from the specific nature of

meta-organizations as both embedded processual entities and embedded structures relying on decisions. Meta-organizationality includes 1) multi-referentiality as a result of the special membership composition of meta-organizations, 2) layering as a result of the combination and accumulation of social orders, 3) dialectical actorhood as a result of the internal and external tensions around autonomy and dependence, and 4) multi-level decidedness as a result of the interconnection of decisions (Berkowitz and Bor 2024). Fig. 4.1 presents these various elements as articulated and described here after.

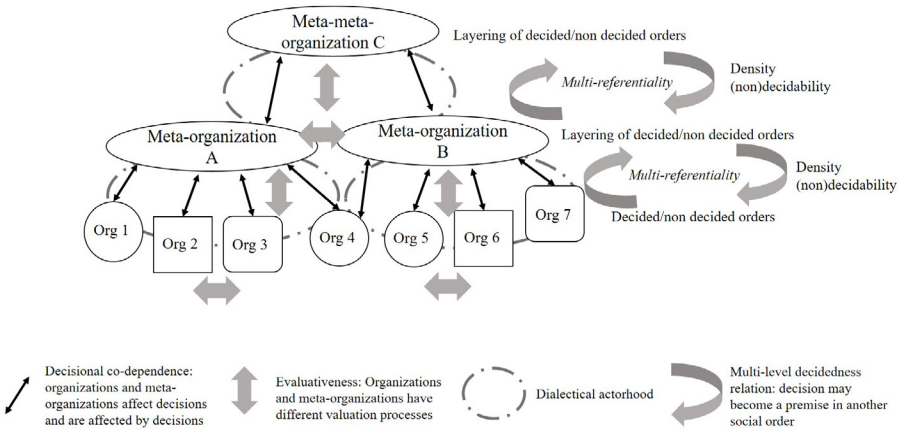

Fig. 4.1. Meta-organizationality and the decisional perspective on meta-organizations. Image by the author.

The layering of organization, meta-organization and meta-meta-organization creates complex relations between the various levels of social order. Decisional co-dependence emerges between organizations and (meta-)meta-organizations. Evaluativeness varies across levels. A multi-level decidedness relation exists between levels, whereby a decision may become a premise for decisions in another level. Dialectical actorhood shapes and is shaped by these dynamics.

Multi-referentiality refers to the diversity and multiplicity of norms, expertise, professionalities, values, logics, cultures and perspectives that are embedded in and brought together by member organizations within a meta-organization. Multi-referentiality is heightened in multi-stakeholder meta-organizations that by definition bring together organizations from various domains of society (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017). Multi-referentiality involves potentially conflicting or divergent references, as can be seen in the

case of the International Whaling Commission (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). Further, multi-referentiality can raise significant issues with attributing responsibility (Gibel, Überbacher, and Scherer 2025). Multi-referentiality also presents a strong recursive dimension. Indeed, following the social dimension of meaning, it implies that members and the meta-level actor may evaluate, value and prioritize the meta-organization differently (i.e. members among themselves, and members and meta-level actor).

Layering describes the establishment of new social orders (those of meta-organizations) alongside or on top of existing social orders (those of member organizations), without supplanting or substituting them (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). Even further, meta-organizations may create meta-meta- (or more) organizations. Each additional layer requires decision authority to be vested to some extent, from 'lower' layers, leading to challenges in decision-making, actorhood, responsibility and accountability (Berkowitz and Bor 2024). Complexity increases with each layer, making it difficult to discern decision-making authority. It appears clear that layering may aggravate risks of escaping responsibility and may create even more of what have been called 'smokescreen effects' (Berkowitz et al. 2022). Layering also contributes to the cognitive loading of members, and a form of decoupling between decision centres and the lowest or minimal organization unit (i.e. the member organization). This further raises the question of decidability due to the layering and intertwining of decided and non-decided social orders (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). Social orders can be decided and non-decided, but can also become non-decidable when several orders in the meta-organization clash and can no longer be changed.

The concept of dialectical actorhood aims to capture the complex and dynamic equilibrium processes that happen within meta-organizations as they constantly need to balance the autonomy, collective identity, accountability and responsibility of both members and themselves as meta-level actors. Meta-organizations are characterized by a dual actorhood, as argued by Fredriksson (2023). Actorhood is dual because the meta-level actor has actorhood itself, while members also possess actorhood and there is no merger of them all. However, the idea of dialectical actorhood moves beyond duality to conceptualize

the relationality of meta-organizations, which includes both internal dynamics (relation among meta-level actor and members) and external dynamics (relations between meta-organizations and non-members). In this sense, dialectical actorhood is similar to what has been studied as collective identity in meta-organizations (Laviolette et al. 2022). Actorhood in itself already shifts the emphasis from agentic action to the ability of a collective to make joint decisions and be externally recognized as a social actor (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020). Dialectical actorhood integrates these two aspects (being able to make decisions and being recognized externally). For the internal aspect, meta-organizational dialectical actorhood involves autonomy-dependence tensions between members and the meta-level actor. For the external aspect, dialectical actorhood describes the struggle for recognition and addressability of the meta-organization as a social actor in the environment, leading to tensions or uncertainty about decision attribution and accountability (of members and the meta-level actor).

Lastly, multi-level decidedness constitutes a key attribute of meta-organizations because they imply recursively determined decision-making processes at multiple levels. Multi-level decidedness has a recursive dimension, according to the decisional perspective on organization and in particular Luhmann's (2005) key argument that decisions become premises for other decisions. However, this can happen within and across (interconnected systems that are) meta-organizations, meta-meta-organizations, orchestrated systems, macro-organizations, and so on. Decidedness further involves two characteristics: 1) decisionality as the extent to which social orders are subject to decision making, i.e. the density of decisions in social orders; and 2) decidability as the actors' ability to reach collective decisions and change social orders. The interest here lies in the fact that one decision can become the premise for a decision elsewhere but can produce more or less density and can further lead to decidability or non-decidability in other systems. Multi-level decidedness implies a co-dependence of organizations and meta-organizations (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019a).

Lastly, these four characteristics or meta-organizationality parameters affect one another and cannot be thought of without conceptualizing their interconnections (Berkowitz and Bor 2024).

Integrating all dimensions

If we consider decisions as the constitutive feature of organizations and social orders as the constitutive feature of societies, we can attempt to integrate all these dimensions (see Table 4.3 and Fig. 4.2).

Table 4.3. Dimensions of social orders, from infra-organizationality to meta-organizationality. Source: the author, adapted from Grothe-Hammer et al. (2022), Berkowitz et al. (forthcoming), Berkowitz and Bor (2024), Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024).

Infra-organizationality (parameters of social orders)	**Structural *** (structure)**	**Entitative *** (system)**	**Contextual *** (context)**	**Meta- *** (nesting)**
Ontology (structure or system)	Membership	Interconnected decision-making	Temporality Territoriality	Multi-referentiality
Determination (decided or non-decided)	Hierarchy Rules	Actorhood	Professionality	Layering
Changeability or decidability (decidable or non-decidable)	Monitoring	Collective identity		Dialectical actorhood
Acceptance (accepted or contested)	Sanction			Multi-level decidedness
Density or decisionality (density of decision-making)				

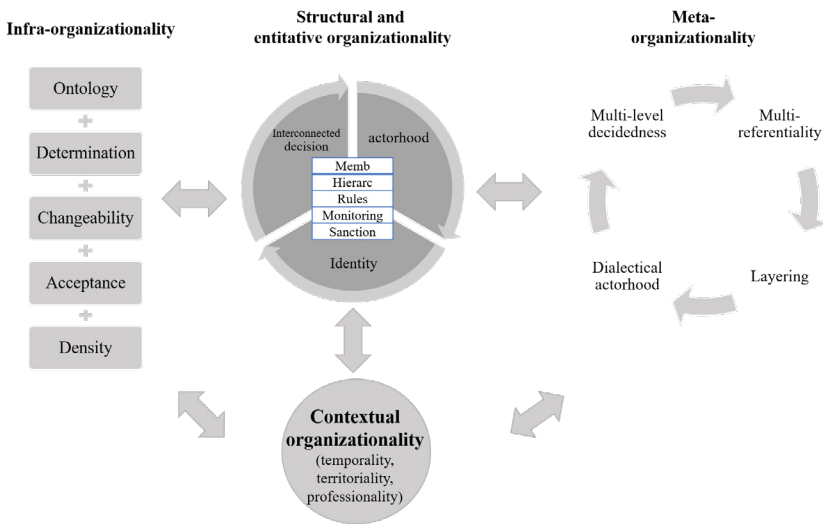

Fig. 4.2. Tentative overarching model showing how infra-organizationality, structural and entitative organizationality, contextual organizationality and meta-organizationality affect one another. Image based on Berkowitz (2024), Berkowitz and Bor (2024), Berkowitz et al. (2024) and Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz (2024).

The starting point in integrating these dimensions would be the fundamental parameters of social orders (Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024). In line with the terminology of the existing framework, these parameters could be labelled 'infra-organizationality'. Infra-organizationality basically describes the foundational and underlying parameters of social orders that affect their nature and dynamics. Infra-organizationality includes previously described parameters: ontology, determination, changeability and acceptance, to which I suggested the addition of density or decisionality. To repeat, density of decisions here aims to describe the degree of decisionality of a social order, i.e. the density or intensity of decision-making in the structure or the system. The question remains open at this stage of whether density also applies to other dimensions (meta-organizationality or contextual organizationality, for instance). Next comes structural organizationality, which has to do with structure or organizational components (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011; Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022). Then entitative organizationality, which deals with various dimensions of the entity itself as a system or processual entity: interconnected decision-making, actorhood and collective identity (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Grothe-Hammer 2019b; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022). I am also proposing 'contextual' organizationality, which covers temporality, territoriality and professionality. And then finally comes meta-organizationality to deal with specific attributes resulting from the nesting of social orders in meta-organizations (or meta-meta- and more): multi-referentiality, layering, dialectical actorhood and multi-level decidedness (Berkowitz and Bor 2024).

The overarching model (Fig. 4.2) explores whether and how all these dimensions might affect one another. For instance, contextual organizationality can be thought to affect infra-organizationality—that is to say the ontology of an order (is it a structure or a system/entity?), its determination, changeability, acceptance and density. Temporality was already conceptualized by the temporal dimension of meaning in Luhmann's work (see Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024), and can be integrated with changeability, acceptance and density. However, territoriality also affects these parameters. Acceptance—whether a social order is accepted or contested—is clearly linked to spatiality, because by nature this is a very relational act and so it is based on perceptions of

actors who belong to, are shaped by and co-evolve with their territories. And then there is the issue of professionality, which has a somewhat different status than the other dimensions. Professionality can affect acceptance but also, I would assume, decisionality. *Savoir faire* and *savoir être* in a profession might influence the extent to which certain social orders are accepted or contested. So the relations between contextual organizationality and infra-organizationality are not so obvious, but they were worth mentioning and should be discussed further.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delved into the development of a more integrated approach based on decisions. Drawing on decisionalism, social order analysis and meta-organizations, I propose five dimensions of an overarching theory: infra-organizationality, structural organizationality, entitative organizationality, contextual organizationality and meta-organizationality. So infra-organizationality basically describes the foundational and underlying parameters of social orders that affect their nature and dynamics. Infra-organizationality includes ontology, determination, changeability, acceptance and density. Next comes structural organizationality, which has to do with structure or organizational components. Then entitative organizationality deals with various dimensions of the system or processual entity: interconnected decision-making, actorhood and collective identity. Contextual organizationality is about temporality, territoriality and professionality. Finally, meta-organizationality addresses specific attributes resulting from the nesting of social orders in meta-organizations (or meta-meta- and more): multi-referentiality, layering, dialectical actorhood and multi-level decidedness.

5. Meta-Organizations as Spaces for (Counter)-Hegemonic Dynamics

When attempting to reflect upon complex global and contemporary challenges such as the climate crisis or biodiversity loss, we are confronted with a paradox. This paradox results from the multiple 'imperatives' of social orders. Existing social orders—i.e. temporarily fixed meanings that lend the world a degree of predictability and enable interactions among actors (Hechter and Horne 2003)—are precisely the root cause of our problems: our systems of production, consumption and labour, our organizations are causing the destructions that threaten our safe operating space, our habitability on earth (Berkowitz 2023a; O'Neill et al. 2018). Shrivastava already argued in 1994 that organizations are the primary tool with which humans affect nature (Shrivastava 1994). Even further, "corporations as they exist today are *exploitative, sociopathic, predatory* organizations" (Clegg and Starbuck 2009, p. 339). Being at the root of these problems means that social orders must be held responsible for them. I will call this the 'responsibility' imperative of social orders.

It follows that we need to change said social orders in order to counter their very effects. It seems obvious that we need new social orders and new forms of organizations to address grand challenges (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Gümüsay et al. 2022), otherwise the same outcomes are bound to happen. But this means that socio-ecological transitions and other transformations towards sustainability cannot be implemented without rethinking and changing the very foundational social orders upon which societies function. This is the 'transformation'

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imperative: we need to change social orders if we are to live in a more liveable world for all.

And yet, at the same time, social orders are needed precisely because they give order to the world—they provide a basic context for potential collective actions (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022). This is the 'enabling' imperative of social orders: we need social orders because they enable actors to collaborate and cooperate.

And if we go one step further, social orders are also what enable us, as a society and as scholars, to construct and give value(s) to these problems. For instance, we use mathematical modelling to understand, predict and make decisions about climate change (Dahan-Dalmédico 2007). Some meta-organizations such as the co-management table of Baix Empordà en Catalunya enable various organizations to come together, exchange, use modelling tools, value and co-construct problems and solutions (Berkowitz 2023b). This is the 'cognitive' imperative: we need social orders to think about these problems. So, this requires us—'students of organizations', as Ahrne and Brunsson often put it—to not only provide tools for understanding and changing social orders, but also to question our very own frameworks.

To put it differently, social orders are at the root of problems (responsibility imperative), they are also necessary both to think about the problems (cognitive imperative) and to address them (enabling imperative), and at the same time the social orders must change or be changed (transformation imperative) to solve the problems.

For various reasons, recent works have—albeit implicitly—overwhelmingly promoted meta-organizations as promising devices for organizing, contributing to and ensuring sustainability transitions (Alo and Arslan 2023; Berkowitz 2016a; 2018; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Bor and O'Shea 2022; Carmagnac and Carbone 2019; Chaudhury et al. 2016; Fernandes and Lopes 2022; Lupova-Henry and Dotti 2022; Rogerson, Grosvold, and Crane 2025; Saniossian, Beaucourt, and Lecocq 2022; Valente and Oliver 2018). However, meta-organizations can also actively resist sustainability transitions, or even help members escape legislation and justice for such transitions (Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026c; Bor and O'Shea 2022; Baldi, de Bakker, and Melz 2024). As such,

meta-organizations are not neutral. They can be powerful or weak actors that contribute to promoting or resisting change. In a decisionalist perspective, they raise important questions relative to responsibility for decisions.

Imperatives and paradoxes of meta-organizations and transformations of social orders

The imperatives of social orders for transformation can be transposed to meta-organizations, which creates additional complexity. As argued previously, the contemporary, industrialized, capitalist, globalized, technicist society is increasingly decided and organized (Apelt et al. 2017; Borraz 2022; Bromley and Meyer 2015; Luhmann 2018). In particular, contemporary society increasingly relies on an intertwining and layering of social orders in these meta-organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008). Meta-organizations populate our worlds and attend to many issues (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Berkowitz et al. 2022). Meta-organizations have been around for a long time but they keep being created under varying forms, as I showed in Chapter 2. They are active in all spheres of society, from industries such as the oil and gas sector (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017) to higher education (Brankovic 2018; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020), public administrations (Zyzak and Jacobsen 2019), social movements and civil society (Karlberg and Jacobsson 2015; Laurent et al. 2020), to health partnerships (Cropper and Bor 2018) or innovation projects (Webb 2017). They are part of contemporary society, have evolved with it and even enable it. In a sense, meta-organizations and contemporary society are co-constituting one another.

A small caveat is in order here. Some works consider other forms of collective action such as traditional chefferies in Cameroon as meta-organizations (Biwole Fouda 2024). This might introduce nuance to the claim that meta-organizations are constitutive of contemporary global social order. Even further, if we agree that confederations are meta-organizations (See Kerwer 2013; Ahrne et al. 2016), then we could think of Ancient Greek confederations of city-states—such as the Delian League (478–404 BCE), the Achaean League (280–146 BCE) and

the confederation of Maya States in the Yucatan Peninsula, League of Mayapan (987–1461 CE)—as meta-organizations. In that sense, close to two hundred historical or contemporary confederations of states, confederations of tribes and present-day federations or associations of indigenous communities could be considered meta-organizations (Berkowitz 2024).

However, the point remains that the definition of meta-organizations—as organizations constituted by other, autonomous organizations with their own decided and non-decided social orders—has interesting implications. Indeed, it follows from this definition that meta-organizations layer social orders, and as meta-level actors they come on top of and are constituted of other social orders, those of organization members (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). And at the same time, meta-organizations contribute to the ordering of the world by producing social order themselves, through decisions, norms, self-regulation, lobbying, standardization, (Berkowitz et al. 2022; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022).

So, what does that imply for the paradox of social order transformations? We can argue that meta-organizations are simultaneously the root cause of all our problems (the responsibility imperative, with some specificities relative to their nature), are needed to solve complex social problems (the enabling imperative), constitute alternative forms of organizations for transitions (the transformation imperative) (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Gümüsay et al. 2022) and at the same time, they enable us to think of and frame these problems (cognitive imperative) (Berkowitz 2018, 2023b).

Indeed, if we consider the responsibility imperative, many international organizations contributed and still contribute to 'capitalist deathworlds' (Varman and Vijay 2022a), pursuing accumulation and economic growth through human and nonhuman exploitation. Many of these international organizations are actually meta-organizations: e.g. the World Bank and the IMF are among the usual suspects. In essence, understanding globalization cannot happen without a thorough understanding of the role played by meta-organizations (Berkowitz et al. 2022). Going further, meta-organizations can have different roles in transforming society, especially in the perspective of

transition studies (Bor and O'Shea, 2022). Some meta-organizations resist energy transitions and seek to reproduce and perpetuate social orders that have negative effects on our habitability on earth—a self-evident example is the powerful American Petroleum Institute, which intensively strategizes to maintain the oil and gas industry globally. Another example is the International Chamber of Commerce, which has lobbied for decades to resist any measure against climate change (Bergquist and David 2023). Such meta-organizations create social orders by designing global standards (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Carmagnac, Touboulic, and Carbone 2022), by setting laws and regulatory frameworks, by shaping or influencing public policies and organizing states (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Kerwer 2019; Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Kerwer 2013).

So, we need to change meta-organizations to achieve sustainable change (the transformation imperative). Certain specific meta-organizations, such as place-based, multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, can be conceived as social innovations that are needed for sustainability transitions (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz et al. 2023; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Saniossian, Lecocq, and Beaucourt 2022; Webb 2017). This also relates to the transformation imperative. Their innovative organizational dimensions include multi-referential membership with different spheres of society represented, joint decision-making processes, collaborative visioning for the future, accountability mechanisms towards the broader public including civil society (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Bor 2024; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022). These innovative meta-organizations also produce (alternative) social orders for sustainability transitions. This is the enabling imperative. Meta-organizations can produce social orders by creating and diffusing norms and forms of self-regulation, by building members and non-member's capacities (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz and Souchaud 2019b, 2024) for sustainable innovation in particular (Berkowitz, 2018), and by filling governance gaps (Berkowitz and Souchaud 2017, 2024).

Under certain conditions, meta-organizations can therefore be thought of as transformative agents. Being transformative means that

meta-organizations take active steps towards transitions and facilitate or accelerate transition trajectories (Berkowitz and Gadille 2022). These conditions might include: being embedded in territories or places in order to be more adaptive and responsive to local realities; having actorhood, which is to say being recognized externally and internally as a social actor able to make decisions and to be held accountable for them (Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020); or being reflexive about the impacts of the collective on human and nonhuman beings, and enabling sustainable transformations of labour and professionalities—that is, collective work identities, practices and norms in a profession (Berkowitz and Gadille 2022).

Finally, meta-organizations are also devices or arenas where societal problems are themselves constructed and framed, where values are discussed and given priority and where innovative solutions can be invented (Berkowitz 2018, 2023b; Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks 2020; Berkowitz, Guérineau, and Petit 2023; Priestersberger, Reischauer, and Hoffman 2024). This is the cognitive imperative.

Meta-organization, macro-organization and the proliferation of 'organizational monsters'

There is a dark side to meta-organizations, and to organizing among organizations more broadly. Meta-organizations and other forms of organizations indeed contribute to creating and maintaining hegemonic, unfair, destructive global orders. Meta-organizations can produce smokescreen effects—mechanisms to cover up negative actions—which would explain why member organizations, especially firms, so eagerly set up or join meta-organizations (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz et al. 2022). They may evade or dilute responsibility (see Brunsson, Gustafsson Nordin, and Tamm Hallström 2022), especially through scapegoating (Alexius 2026), blurring or re-directing responsibility across levels (Gibel, Überbacher, and Scherer 2025). Further, meta-organizations can produce inertia (König, Schulte, and Enders 2012), actively resist transitions (Bor and O'Shea 2022), reproduce domination relations and empower large players over small ones (Carmagnac, Touboulic, and Carbone 2022). Meta-organizations can also transfer responsibility to

members to avoid accountability (Pazi and Kvåle 2022) or perpetuate models of exploitation, especially in business-only meta-organizations (Alo and Arslan 2023). As such, I argue that some meta-organizations, and other social systems emerging among and beyond organizations and meta-organizations, constitute 'organizational monsters': powerful, ambiguously organized social actors that intervene in the world.

These organizational monsters escape responsibility because of their organizational nature and structure, even though they inflict devastation at the nexus of ecocide and genocide (Crook 2024; Crook and Short 2021) and organize the reprimarization and (re)colonization of entire territories (Fernandes et al. 2026; Orain 2025), as well as the brutalization and destruction of whole categories of humans, in particular Indigenous peoples (Mirkamali, Hajivand, and Tavassoli Fam 2023).

Despite recent calls (Ahrne, Berkowitz, and Bor 2020), there are still few works about the dark side of meta-organizations (Alo and Arslan 2023; Carmagnac, Touboulic, and Carbone 2022). Notably, few works unpack how this dark side results from the very nature of meta-organizations, which specific meta-organizational mechanisms may enable members or meta-level actors to escape or dilute responsibility, and how this might be further analysed through decisionalism. Brunsson, Gustafsson Nordin and Tamm Hallström (2022) argue that meta-organizations may be understood as attempts to control the expansion of organizations, which strongly relates to issues of responsibility attribution, especially in a global world. Drawing on Bauman's work, they see the dilution of responsibility (in macro-organization) as an important driver of resistance to globalization, precisely because globalization processes are perceived as anonymous, despite or as a result of the multiplicity of organizations and meta-organizations involved.

Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) shows that structured, layered, rational bureaucracy made the Holocaust possible with its dehumanizing nature. Bureaucracy, Bauman suggests, "is intrinsically capable of genocidal action" (ibid., p. 106). In his view, we still live "in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust from happening" (ibid., p. 86). Drawing on Bauman's work, Whyte's (2020) book *Ecocide: Kill the Corporation Before it Kills Us* shows finely how the organizational

structures of corporations—and the historical constitution of the corporate person itself—enable physical and moral distance between those who take decisions, those who execute them and, I would add here, those who bear their price. Whyte further argues that corporate personhood physically and ontologically removes perpetrators from the violence of their decisions, which leads to irresponsibility. Whyte's use of Bauman argument resonates with several works on meta-organizations or the decisional perspective on organizations.

> [The] Holocaust was made possible by 'highly instrumental rationality guiding the organization, obedience to a rigidly enforced set of rules, and a division of labour based on smaller and smaller takes. The multiple layers of rigidly enforces decisions in modern bureaucracies create physical and moral distance between those who take decisions to do something and those who then execute the decisions. Bureaucratic structures can therefore physically and ontologically remove the perpetrators from even the most extreme acts of violence. [...] The corporation works precisely in the same way. [...] It is the same set of structural dynamics within corporations that provide the foundations of the corporation's dehumanising force and it is through the creation of the corporate person that the corporation's capacity to act in an anti-human way is critically enhanced' (Bauman 1989, cited in Whyte 2020, p. 31).

Following Brunsson et al. (2018, 2022), macro-organizations are large systems of interconnected decision-making wherein various organizations and meta-organizations take first-level and second-level order decisions (i.e. more direct or less direct decisions that can be accounted for) and decisions that may become premises for other decisions in the system. While macro-organization presents all five elements of structural organizationality, it lacks some dimensions of entitative organizationality (i.e. collective identity and actorhood).

> Yet a macro-organization differs from the traditional construction of the autonomous formal organization in that it dilutes responsibility rather than concentrating it. The key decision premises are decided by other organizations. An organization cannot issue standards for itself, just as it cannot accredit or certify itself. Because the decision premises are all presented as voluntary, responsibility attribution among the organizations is complicated. The interconnected decision premises form a chain of decisions and a responsibility that is diluted with

> every decision. In fact, the macro-organization makes the actorhood of participating organizations seem less realistic. They are all dependent on the decisions of other organizations for their existence and are therefore less capable of bearing responsibility. […]
>
> So unlike formal organizations, including meta-organizations, the macro-organization cannot be held responsible, nor even accountable for the decisions made within its structure. Rather, this form of organization is constructed such that anyone can decide what another should do, but no one can make a decision directly affecting everyone. […]
>
> Macro-organizations show a high degree of organization, and because of that, the responsibility of participating organizations is highly diluted, and it is impossible to find anyone responsible for the organization as a whole. (Brunsson et al. 2022, p. 12).

Some works have been exploring the role of meta-organizations in globalization and social orders in the Global South (Alo and Arslan 2023; Fernandes et al. 2026). For Quijano (2007), the 'coloniality of power' refers to a system of power relations that originated during the colonial era but continues to shape social structures, cultural practices and knowledge production, leading to social, cultural and epistemological dominations. Meta-organizations such as the Mercosur or the EU reinforce these forms of domination and increase coloniality of power through commercial agreements that increase exploitation and deforestation (Fernandes et al. 2026). Fernandes et al. (2026) show that meta-organizations such as industrial lobbies play a key role in maintaining global orders of domination, while some grassroots meta-organizations attempt to resist such global orders. From this study, we can infer that the EU-Mercosur agreement—a highly contested bilateral trade agreement organizing trade between the European Union and the Mercosur Bloc by opening agricultural and industrial markets, imposing certain standards, and reducing some tariffs, with important consequences for local, indigenous or marginalized communities and ecosystems—may constitute a visible, first-level order decision of a form of macro-organization wherein many organizations and meta-organizations attempt to shape social orders.

However, what we can also observe with the EU-Mercosur agreement is that despite a high degree of decisionality or density of decisions,

macro-organizing relations between the two meta-organizations simultaneously leads to a dilution of responsibility while creating global social orders and maintaining the coloniality of power. This may bring some nuance to the analysis of Brunsson et al. (2022), but it should also reinforce focus on multi-referentiality and actorhood, as in Gibel et al.'s (2025) study of responsibility dilution in FIFA.

In the case of the EU-Mercosur agreement, it can be argued that responsibility is not diluted because of the 'high degree of organization', as Brunsson et al. (2022) argue. Rather, we can make the assumption that it is enabled by the combination of multi-directionality of decisionality (e.g. several actors decide for each other, which creates co-dependences) with a high degree of decisionality in structural organizationality, and a diluted actorhood (i.e. low to no actorhood) that can dilute responsibility for the organization as a whole (see Fig. 5.1 and 5.2). This combination therefore leads to the transfer of responsibility and criticism to the most visible actors (EU and Mercosur), a re-directing strategy similarly highlighted in FIFA (Gibel et al., 2025).

If we think of meta-organizations (FIFA) or macro-organizations (the system of actors emerging around the EU-Mercosur agreement), what is the difference in terms of 'organizational monsters'? I would argue that while both are highly organized, one monster is more vague (EU-Mercosur) than the other (FIFA). Let's think of macro-organization as an iceberg: some parts are highly visible, but much of the macro-organizing is invisible and therefore hard to analyse and unpack. Taking inspiration from a systematic review in which the authors distinguish between collectively decided and orchestrated social orders (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025), we can try to conceptualize macro-organization as a multi-directional system of decisions (see Fig. 5.1). Decided order in a macro-organization differs from decided order in meta-organizations, as meta-level actors or as orchestrated systems. Decided order in a macro-organization is multi-directional because several organizations can affect and be affected by the system of decisions, in various ways. This is why I would talk of multi-directional decisionality—the density of decisions affects and is affected by several players.

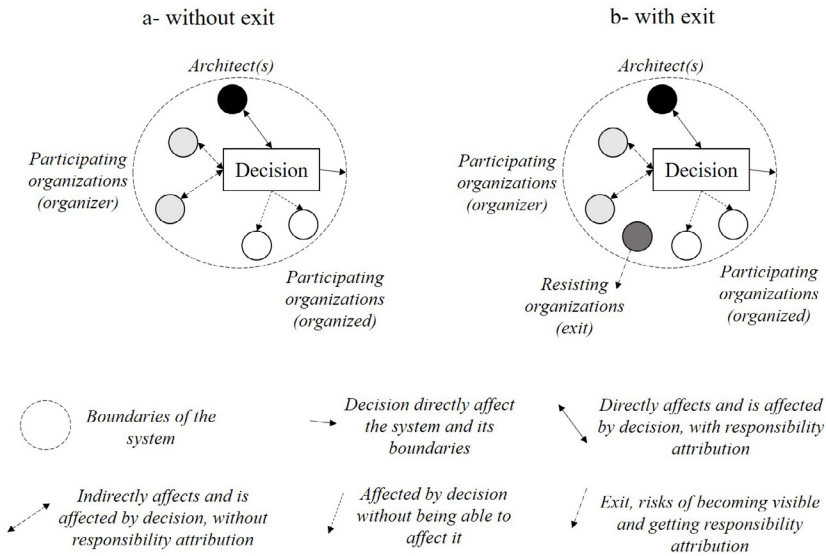

Fig. 5.1. Multi-directional system of decisions in macro-organization, with and without resistance and exit. Image adapted from Coulombel and Berkowitz (2025).

Macro-organizations are multi-directional systems of decisions, where architects are those that directly affect and are affected by decisions and responsibility for those decisions can be attributed to them. Participating organizations considered 'organizers' can indirectly affect and be affected by decisions without being attributed responsibility for them. Participating organizations that are instead 'organized' are affected by the decision without being able to affect it. Resisting organizations can exit the system, but risk becoming visible and having a form of responsibility attributed to them.

Further, we can conceive the Mercosur and the EU as the architects of the macro-organization. By 'architect', here I mean those key actors that are making structural and organizational decisions that affect and shape other participating organizations in the macro-organizations. The decisions architects make, here through the agreement, simultaneously affect them and make them responsible and accountable, as architects constitute the visible part of the iceberg that is a macro-organization. However, various participating organizations also act as organizers in the sense that they affect decisions more or less directly (especially through advocacy activities) and may be affected by them. Meta-

organizations and individual organizations constitute participating organizations precisely if and when they manage to shape decisions at the macro-organizational level, i.e. through making decisions that become premises for the macro-organizational level decisions. Meta-organizations offer an important structural support for this: the double bind mechanism mentioned previously, or the dual relation implied by meta-organizations (Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026b), since both the meta-level actor and individual members can develop lobbying strategies in macro-organizations. Some non-participating organizations can still be affected—various sectors and industries, civil society organizations, indigenous communities, —as we see for the EU-Mercosur agreement.

Grassroots meta-organizations, on the other hand, may seek to resist this macro-organization by issuing decisions of their own at the local and regional level, e.g. in Brazil (Fernandes et al. 2026). However, in the process, two things might happen (See Fig. 5.1): 1) they may to some extent succeed in exiting the macro-organization, and 2) they may become visible targets and be newly identified as an emerging part of the iceberg (and may thus be held more accountable than other participating organizations). Business meta-organizations conversely remain in the dark and push for the exploitation of natural resources in the Amazon rainforest in particular. This echoes Brunsson et al.'s (2022) arguments about the relations between lack of actorhood and dilution of responsibility. It also raises many questions about responsibility mechanisms and conditions under which meta-organizations may have a positive or negative impact, especially where socio-ecological transitions are concerned.

Creating, maintaining and resisting social order

In this paradigmatic shift, and given the inflation of organization in various forms and at various levels (Borraz 2022; Bromley and Meyer 2015; Brunsson, Gustafsson Nordin, and Tamm Hallström 2022; Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025; Musselin 2021), how should we understand the transformation of social order by organizations? In Fig. 5.2, I outline a preliminary model of the creation of decided order among organizations, the varying directionality of decisions and responsibility, system boundaries, entitative organizationality and decisional relations.

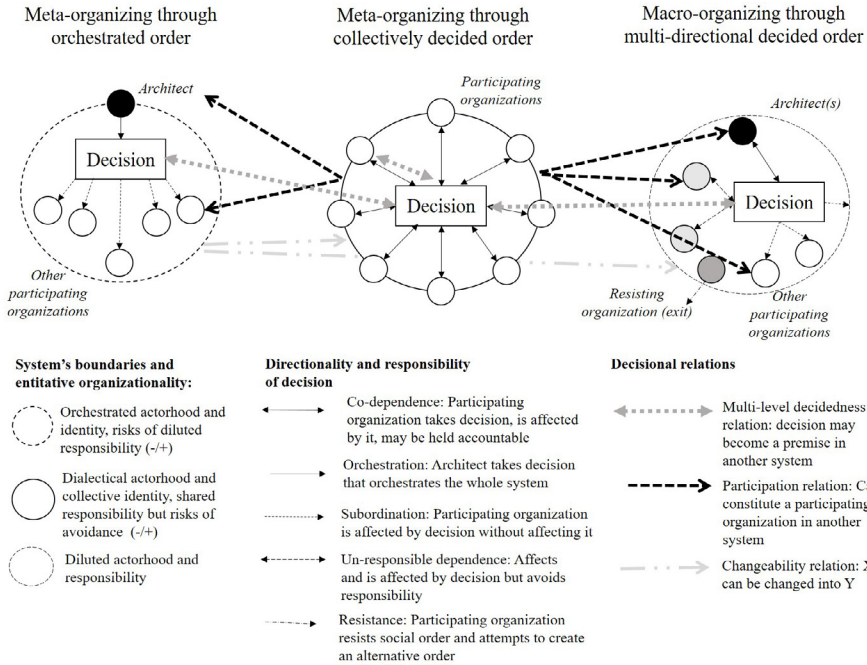

Fig. 5.2. Model of creating decided order among organizations, as well as directionality, responsibility and relations among participating organizations. Image by the author.

Comparing meta-organization through an orchestrated order, through collectively decided order and macro-organization through multi-directional decided order enables consideration of the differences between these in terms of system boundaries and entitative organization, directionality and responsibility, but also decisional relations.

As argued previously, there can be different ways of creating decided order among organizations: meta-organizing through orchestrated order, meta-organizing through collectively decided order and macro-organizing through multi-directional decided order.

First, meta-organizing can happen through orchestrated order with the presence of an architect that makes decisions affecting the whole system (Coulombel and Berkowitz 2025). In that case, participating organizations are only affected by decisions and have a subordinate relation with the architect. The orchestrated decided order may come with orchestrated actorhood and more or less orchestrated identity. However, there are varying risks of responsibility dilution, as architects

may argue that they do not constitute the meta-organization, and there may be no contractual or formal ties among participating organizations. More work is needed to understand the implications of this form of decided order.

In meta-organization through collectively decided orders, participating organizations (rather than 'members', as the term is used in various works on meta-organizations) develop a form of co-dependence: they contribute to making decisions, are affected by them and may be held accountable for them (especially when there is clear collective actorhood and collective identity). As a result, such meta-organizations present clear system boundaries, dialectical actorhood and a collective identity, and supposedly shared responsibility. However, the nature of the decided order itself may create risks of responsibility evasion and therefore dilution. We cannot ignore the potential power asymmetries here, with some actors being more influential than others. There would clearly be variations in both the directionality of decisions and decisionality in collectively decided orders.

In macro-organizing, or multi-directional decided orders, the system of decisions involves a variety of actors and varying directionality of decisions. There is diluted actorhood and responsibility of the system itself (i.e. no collective social actor with full entitative organizationality per se). Architects also represent a form of co-dependence in that they are the key participating organizations making structural decisions for the system as a whole but also being affected by those decisions and being held accountable for them. This is visible in the EU-Mercosur agreement: Mercosur and the EU are architects (and meta-organizations) that shape and are shaped by the agreement. As they constitute the visible part of the iceberg that is the macro-organization, and present a co-dependent directionality of decisions, they are the ones made responsible for the effects of their decisions. Other participating organizations may develop an un-responsible dependence: they may influence decisions (especially through lobbying, and often through the double bind mechanism) and be affected by such decisions, but they avoid taking responsibility for them. This is typically the case for business meta-organizations that conduct advocacy at the EU level are the targets of industrial regulation in the EU-Mercosur agreement.

Next, some participating organizations are subordinated to the system: they are affected by the decisions but cannot affect them, i.e. they cannot make decisions that would become the premises of the macro-organization. This is the case for certain sectors and industries, for indigenous communities or other marginalized and extracted-from communities. Finally, some participating organizations may resist the macro-organization and exit it through their decisions. For instance, this could be the case for certain grassroots, indigenous meta-organizations such as APIB through their actions at the ATL where they de-territorialize and re-territorialize dominant global decided orders, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Lastly, there are transformational or decisional relations and possible fluidity among the variety of participating organizations identified here. First of all, the multi-level decidedness relation means that a decision in one of the identified systems may become a premise in another system (whether a participating organization of the system, or a different system) (see Fig. 5.2). Then, a participation relation may exist among the various players. For instance, the meta-organization may act either as an architect or as a participating organization in both the orchestrated system and the macro-organization. Finally, there is a changeability relation: one form may be changed into another. For instance, we could imagine some orchestrated systems becoming a meta-organization by transforming their decision-making process (from orchestrated to collective), and changing their system boundaries and entitative organizationality through reinforcement. An orchestrated system gaining size, expanding its participating organizations, changing scale and creating an increasingly global social order may be viewed as turning into a macro-organization. Other changeability relations are difficult to conceive, owing to the effect of decidedness: when there is a higher degree of decisionality or density, especially on actorhood and identity, how can this be de-organized? Can we see a meta-organization with clear actorhood losing its actorhood? More work needs to be done to understand the dynamics across forms, as well as potential tipping points and changes in responsibility. A more radical question, however, is that of relations and social bonds in social orders, especially with more-than-humans.

Shifting paradigms and imagining alternatives

Several critical works demonstrate that organizations are the main tools of domination acting on humans and more-than-humans (Mies and Shiva 1993; Shrivastava 1994; Shrivastava et al. 2019; Wright and Nyberg 2017). Further, it has been argued that the major ecological challenges we face—climate change, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, ocean acidification, —are the result of a neoliberal, capitalist paradigm in which the dominant organizations (states, multinationals, global values chains) are conceived as systems for exploiting and destroying humans and more-than-humans (Berkowitz 2023a; Crook and Short 2021; Dunlap 2022; Gaard 2001; Harper et al. 2013; Whyte 2020). Humans and more-than-humans are constructed as resources used for growth and financial performance. In that sense, neoliberalism appears as an ideological and political project that is accompanied by the privatization of public resources, the commodification of activities and social ties, and global deregulation, all of which pose serious risks for democracies (Varman and Vijay 2022b). This raises the question of how to change social orders and how to imagine alternatives.

The current system of social orders—organizations, meta-organizations and macro-organizations—as mechanisms of ocean or life destruction is mostly based on a relation between humans and more-than-humans which conceives the latter as resources to exploit (Berkowitz 2023a). This comes with narratives around problems or grand challenges, which build on and perpetuate domination systems, marginalization and exclusion, while ignoring major players in the attribution of responsibility. Such inaccurate diagnoses of problems lead to ill-advised policy-making and managerial approaches. These misguided solutions risk aggravating problems. For instance, the 'Malthusian overfishing narrative' views world population size as the main root cause of overfishing (Finkbeiner et al. 2017). Consequently, this narrative—which is often used in other contexts too—puts not only the blame but also the responsibility for taking action on regions of the world with the highest population growth rates. This lopsided argument hides more important factors such as technology, and leads to public policies that focus solely on restricting individual fishermen and women, thus threatening local communities.

Finkbeiner and colleagues (2017) suggest that an alternative narrative should be constructed to highlight the importance of other contributors, i.e. firms and political systems. Rather than focusing on the population factor, this alternative narrative articulates various drivers of overfishing: technology and innovation, demand and distribution, marginalization and equity, and governance and management (and social orders). On this basis, we can also imagine alternative organizing principles such as degrowth, low-tech or co-viability, and the role of meta-organizations in enacting them (Berkowitz 2023a; Vijay et al. 2026).

From transformative meta-organizations...

Several recent works focus on the design of meta-organizations as transformative agents, i.e. the ability of a social actor to contribute positively to sustainability transitions (Berkowitz and Bor 2024; Berkowitz and Gadille 2022; Bor and O'Shea 2022; Michel 2024). It can be argued that the value of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations comes partly from two aspects (Berkowitz, Grothe-Hammer, and Rachlitz 2023): 1) the intrinsic nature of meta-organizations as both multi-level decided social orders and layered processual entities that can make decisions in contexts of extreme uncertainty while being held accountable under certain conditions, and 2) the functioning of meta-organizations as organized intermediaries, which enables them to address collective issues, like ecological destruction in a territory, by drawing on the various logics, values and expertise of members to produce adaptive self-regulation. On the one hand, complex problems and sustainability transition management in general raise specific issues of participatory governance, definition of problems and vision, and prioritization of values (Loorbach 2007). On the other hand, multi-stakeholder meta-organizations may provide—under certain conditions—immediateness, specificity and accountability for collective decisions. They may also empower members and help jointly define a desirable and sustainable future while prioritizing shared values to achieve it (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz, Guérineau, and Petit 2023).

For instance, addressing some important obstacles to transitions (e.g. the societal path dependency to economic growth, which goes against heteronomous limits of the Earth) necessitates 'responsible actorhood'.

Responsible actorhood was identified as a major condition to ensure that a meta-organization can act as a transformative agent (see previous section). Responsible actorhood covers several mechanisms including 'multi-directional accountability' (Bor 2019), especially responsiveness to various stakeholders, from civil society to more-than-human entities such as the biosphere, and the transformation of professionalities. This could be further qualified as meta-organizational *multispecies* accountability, to integrate the necessity of going beyond humans and to take into account more-than-human accountability ties. Responsible actorhood also involves fostering what we called 'transformative mediated reflexivity' at the meta-organizational level, based on Gadille et al. (2013)—this refers to reflexivity about broad ecological impacts and technological disruptions. Ultimately, achieving multi-directional meta-organizational accountability and transformative mediated reflexivity requires 'negotiated professional restructuring', i.e. developing new knowledge and work processes to mitigate the risk of labour resistance to sustainability transitions. Under such organizational conditions (responsible actorhood, meta-organizational multispecies accountability, transformative mediated reflexivity, negotiated professional restructuring), the meta-organization can lift some obstacles to sustainably transforming social orders, such as path dependency to economic growth, or competency traps.

However, addressing these issues through meta-organizations creates tensions between principles of meta-organizationality and principles of sustainability transitions (Berkowitz and Bor 2024). These tensions result from friction between conditions for achieving broad socio-technical transformations for sustainability, such as directionality, diffusion, coordination and reflexibility, and imperatives resulting from meta-organizationality, i.e. multi-referentiality, layering, dialectical actorhood and multi-level decidedness (see previous chapter). Four tensions emerge in particular: the multi-referentiality-directionality tension, the layering-diffusion tension, the dialectical actorhood-coordination tension and the multi-level decidedness-reflexivity tension. It can be argued that transformative meta-organizations are those that effectively navigate these tensions to produce socio-technical system changes.

...To heterotopias and counter-hegemonic meta-organizations

However, many meta-organizations actually contribute to the maintenance of the hegemonic social order. This hegemonic order means exploiting and destroying humans and more-than-humans, inflicting infrastructural violence and dispersing slow poison everywhere, as Vijay and Saiyyed (2025) show in a waste landfill in Ahmedabad.

Developing a more counter-hegemonic perspective means questioning meta-organizations in relation to sustainability transitions and democratic governance (Berkowitz and Fernandes 2026), and in relation to alternatives to institutionalized orders (Vijay et al. 2026). Imagining alternatives that recreate solidarities (Eynaud and Carvalho De França Filho 2023), including between living humans and more-than-humans, and enable new forms of democracy is essential to resist the destructive social order of neoliberalism and 'capitalist deathworlds' (Varman and Vijay 2022a). Drawing on the work of Foucault and Lefebvre, Varman and Vijay (2022b), in their study of LeftWord—a bookstore, coffee corner and independent publisher—show that heterotopia in particular is an essential dimension of alternative, counter-hegemonic organizing.

Lefebvre (1970) conceives of heterotopia as having a dual dimension: firstly, a dimension of historically and presently marginalized spaces; and secondly, a dialectical dimension with isotopia—capitalist spatial orders that are homogeneous and repetitive, insofar as a heterotopic place diverges from and differentiates itself from homogeneous, uniformly organized spaces of capitalism. 'Heterotopia' describes places of co-presence enabling the performative staging of political contestation, the questioning of norms, as well as the imagining of alternative, divergent and multiple perspectives—all crucial activities in the current context of societies evolving towards post-democratic regimes (Varman and Vijay 2022b). Heterotopic spaces, such as LeftWord or the *Friche de la Belle de Mai*—a cultural wasteland that has been transformed into an incubator of alternative practices in Marseille (Lucchini 2013; see also Duprat et al. 2023; Gouteux 2025)—embody forms of resistance to established and dominant social orders, and it is in this sense that heterotopia appears to be essential for imagining multiple directionalities of ecological and social transitions that are fair to all.

As Varman and Vijay (2022b) show, heterotopias act as "counter-sites of inversion, resistance and often subversion" to the dominant social orders of neoliberalism (p. 278). From the perspective of democratically governing ecological and social transitions, we can ask whether and how heterotopias are embodied and organized in meta-organizations. Certain 'grassroots' meta-organizations, emerging directly from and via local actors, can have properties that organize heterotopia (Berkowitz and Fernandes 2026). Grassroots, territorialized meta-organizations seem indeed better suited to Lefebvre's notion of heterotopic space and Varman and Vijay's use of it. It is unclear whether heterotopias could be embodied in other types of meta-organizations, but maybe that should be investigated. Some elements of heterotopia can be found in certain cases of meta-organizations. For example, Acampamento Terra Livre (ATL) appears to be a temporary, heterotopic counter-site. ATL is a yearly arena organized by a meta-organization of indigenous communities, the Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (APIB), enabling the temporary co-presence of indigenous leaders. There were over 7,000 leaders from 176 indigenous communities in Brasília in April 2022, for example. ATL's main objective is to organize resistance against the extractivist order (Domingues and Sauer 2023). What happens at ATL exactly? People organize plenary sessions and meetings with officials. There are also cultural events. What is fascinating here is that ATL has succeeded in articulating the defence of indigenous rights and the demarcation of their lands, in relation to the fight for climate justice and the preservation of biodiversity in Brazil. Although we have begun to look at ATL as a meta-organization, it is still unclear what it is exactly (Berkowitz and Fernandes 2026). At least, it seems to function more like a collective assembly or temporary community, organized by a meta-organization (APIB, Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil) and involving other meta-organizations (e.g. COIAB, Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira), developing participatory approaches that allow multiple voices to contribute to collective struggles, discussions, training and decisions. ATL focuses on amplifying the voices and concerns of indigenous communities, which are still too invisible in Brazilian politics.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Baix Empordà co-management table in Catalunya was founded in 2018 and brings together different organizations from multiple spheres of society (economic, associative, public and scientific players). This multi-stakeholder, multi-referential meta-organization seeks to collaboratively manage conflicts of uses of

a protected area of the Costa Brava coastline (Berkowitz 2023b). With a socially just and ecologically viable objective, the meta-organization seeks to manage various uses of the coastline such as commercial and recreational fishing, tourist activities, scientific and educational activities, and heritage protection. The table's regular meetings, organized in daily workshops, have enabled the development and collective use of a specific methodology for analysing impacts on ecosystems, but also and above all the reversal of value hierarchies. In fact, the meta-organization itself decided to give priority in its decision-making to ecosystem health—i.e. more-than-human living beings—rather than the economic value of activities. In addition, this system makes it possible to decentralize decision-making as close as possible to local stakeholders, giving a voice to many organizations that are generally excluded from these decision-making processes (Berkowitz 2023b). As such, the meta-organization acts as a regulatory intermediary at a very local level, i.e. it constitutes a collaborative actor that produces a form of regulation of members' practices. This kind of meta-organization can also act as a transition intermediary, enabling the transformation of several sectors of activity, production and consumption systems towards greater socio-environmental sustainability. The Baix Empordà meta-organization does several things: 1) territorializing the co-construction of the problem and its solutions; 2) decentralizing and empowering local stakeholders, while enabling the expression of dissensus among a variety of constituencies; and 3) assessing the different values of all living beings, humans and beyond, and hierarchizing them.

In these two cases—ATL and the table—heterotopias indeed manifest as physical co-presence, albeit sometimes temporary. This temporality can be explained partly by the meta-organizational and partially organized nature of these organizations, which have few resources of their own and tend towards a light, flexible coordination process. Then, multi-stakeholder meta-organizations can become heterotopic by structurally organizing multi-referentiality, i.e. through measures to accommodate and foster the multiplicity of logics, values and frames of reference (Berkowitz 2023b). Such multi-referentiality enables the reversal of habitual hierarchies and social relationships, for example with living beings in the case of Catalunya. Finally, in the context of ecological and social transitions, heterotopias imply forms of solidarity (e.g. between indigenous communities, or between humans and more-than-human living beings). Solidarity is implied in these open and heterogeneous, divergent and multiple spaces of heterotopias, as may be the case in

certain co-working spaces (Chabaud, Eynaud, and Raulet Croset 2023). The case of la *Friche de la Belle de Mai*, which has been for a long time and is still an important actor in Marseille (Duprat, Baret, and Mendez 2023; Gouteux 2025), clearly comes to mind when thinking about heterotopias in meta-organizations. It is a beautiful case of heterotopia in a more permanent, place-based meta-organization, exploring alternatives to dominant social orders and systems of oppression.

Heterotopias are essential for the organization of alternatives and resistance to dominant social orders (Varman and Vijay 2022b). Counter-hegemonic meta-organizations, especially grassroots, place-based or territorialized ones, constitute such sites of heterotopia. With ecological stakes and meta-organizational characteristics, heterotopias can take shape thanks to multi-referentiality that fosters a diversity of perspectives and voices and enables the reversal of power relations, as well as physical co-presence and links of solidarity, including with more-than-human living beings (e.g. in the Amazon or on the Catalan coast). These characteristics help to make counter-hegemonic meta-organizations conducive to resistance, as well as places of democratic governance and transnational solidarity expression (Vijay et al. 2026). We can argue that heterotopias in place-based, transformative meta-organizations can give voice to, or at least integrate, more-than-humans. But this raises further questions (see Vijay et al. 2026) about: 1) who is not represented or who is silenced in these meta-organizations (e.g. dominated or subaltern groups such as women or children in addition to more-than-humans), 2) how exactly more-than-humans can be given voices or represented, and 3) how will this change bring about a more liveable world?

Conclusion

There is a dark side of meta-organizations, as they may create and maintain unfair global social orders while escaping responsibility. In this chapter, I started from imperatives and paradoxes of social orders and meta-organizations. I then showed how meta-organizations and macro-organizations may produce and maintain unfair social orders, creating organizational monsters and developing hegemonic strategies. Lastly, I explored some conditions under which meta-organizations can on the contrary constitute spaces of counter-hegemonic collaborations.

6. Meta-Organizations and the Transformations of Social Orders

Twenty years have passed since the pioneer paper by Ahrne and Brunsson in the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Catalan fisheries co-management committees, the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the Association of Supervisors of Banks of the Americas (ASBA), the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), Finance Participative France, the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), La Vía Campesina and the European Union (EU) are examples that illustrate the diversity, breadth and scope of meta-organizations' presence and importance in today's society.

In their pioneer work, Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008) laid the foundation for a meta-organization theory by emphasizing the need for and specificities of this concept compared to other social phenomena and theoretical approaches. Since then, the growing literature on meta-organizations has treated them simultaneously as an empirical phenomenon, as a conceptual tool or analytical lens and increasingly as a specific theory, providing foundations for analysing contemporary problems in a renewed manner. This ambiguous status of meta-organizations, which constitute both an empirical phenomenon and a theoretical perspective, can be found in other literature. It resonates for instance with the paradox literature, which can also be treated as something both empirical and conceptual in nature.

In this book, I defended the position that it can be useful to look at meta-organizations through these different lenses: 1) as a multifaceted empirical phenomenon of significant importance that affects contemporary societies; 2) as a specific conceptual approach that shifts the emphasis on certain dimensions of collective action and can be used for studying evolutionary dynamics, or studied in relation with other

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concepts and literatures; 3) as a theoretical perspective about social orders; and ultimately 4) as specific spaces of power dynamics that enable hegemonic and counter-hegemonic collaborations.

In so doing, I attempted to show that we live in a society of meta-organizations, not just organizations. We live in a society of meta-organizations first of all because they are so present in every domain of society and attend to issues that relate to every sphere of life. They conduct different activities that affect society and produce social order. Most importantly, we live in a society of meta-organizations which create physical and ontological distance between those who make decisions (often meta-organizations such as the EU), those who seek to influence them and create premises for decisions (often meta-organizations such as business lobbies), those who execute such decisions and those who suffer the consequences of such decisions. Perrow's (1991) argument about the society of organizations can be applied to meta-organizations, and I have described some of the consequences of having so many meta-organizations. In line with Perrow, hegemonic meta-organizations—such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization or the International Monetary Fund, or national business and industry associations—tend to amplify the importance of organizations as a dominant feature of social orders. These types of international, hegemonic meta-organizations work to homogenize societies worldwide, and in so doing amplify a global colonization of imaginaries—which Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) would call 'internal colonialism'. International, hegemonic meta-organizations not only disseminate and cement wage dependency, but they also amplify the resourcification of the world and the de-responsibilization of industries for their 'externalities', increasing bureaucratic control at multiple levels and obstructing the emergence of alternative trajectories or shutting down imaginaries. This can be seen with the EU-Mercosur agreement, for instance (Fernandes et al. 2026). I further extend Bauman's (1989) analysis of the dehumanizing force of modern bureaucracy and Whyte's (2020) application of this to transnational corporations, by showing the effects of the multiplication of meta-organizations and the emergence of organizational monsters. I also extend Perrow's argument by exploring how some forms of meta-organizations provide spaces for counter-hegemonic dynamics.

On this basis, I am suggesting three areas of research for future

work on meta-organizations, although there are many more (see for instance Berkowitz, Bor, and Brunsson 2026c): 1) the manifestations and consequences of meta-organizational proliferation, and especially of organizational monsters; 2) the roles of meta-organizations in sustainability transformation in territories; and 3) the use of counter-hegemonic meta-organizing for enacting or strengthening alternative worldviews and world making.

The manifestations and consequences of meta-organizational proliferation

The first main venue for research deals with the manifestations and consequences of meta-organizational proliferation, and in particular meta-organizational or macro-organizational monsters. This stems from both the empirical diagnosis (the explosion of meta-organizations) and the theoretical one (meta-organizations producing social orders has specific implications, and meta-organizations tend to produce more meta-organizations by self-augmentation).

First of all, we need a better understanding of what this meta-organizational proliferation looks like and what its effects are. Based on Chapter 2, more works are needed about families of meta-organizations beyond the typologies and structuring dimensions provided in this book and the literature (Berkowitz, Bucheli, and Dumez 2017; Bor and Almpanopoulou 2026; Bor and Cropper 2023; Bor and Sorsa 2026; Garaudel 2020). We still lack an in-depth understanding of variables, patterns and the relations between forms and functions of meta-organizations. It would be interesting to investigate which forms are more likely or more adequate to fulfil certain functions. For instance, are infra-sectoral or sectoral, domain-based meta-organizations (civil society, business only, food and agriculture, hospitals, social movements) more likely to conduct advocacy work than multi-stakeholder, cross-sectoral meta-organizations? How do the scope of mandate and its specificity affect activities and logics of meta-organizations, and vice versa? Is there a relation between these dimensions of meta-organizations and further dimensions of internal organizing? Certain fields would require specific investigation, particularly sports and higher education. We see the multiplication of meta-organizations in higher education as a key

organizing device (Brankovic 2018; Musselin 2021; Zapp, Jungblut, and Ramirez 2020). One key question is whether and how this relates to the perpetuation of dominant orders (rankification, metrification, commodification of science) (Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2022).

Understanding the effects of meta-organizational proliferation may involve studying the dilution of responsibility (Berkowitz et al. 2022; Brunsson, Gustafsson Nordin, and Tamm Hallström 2022), the cognitive load on delegates or members (Alexius 2026), the mechanisms of self-augmentation of meta-organizations, the complex feedback loops in layered multi-level decidedness, and the impossibility of actually achieving dialectical actorhood, or at least the necessary resulting trade-offs. As organizational monsters spread—in the forms of meta-, macro- or partial organization—more work is needed to understand how to re-imagine and re-anchor responsibility. How should we give names and obligations to these forms of organization with varying organizationality and degrees of layering?

Several works have explored the idea of layering and its effects (Berkowitz 2016a; Berkowitz and Bor 2024, 2025; Grothe-Hammer, Berkowitz, and Berthod 2022). This perspective resonates with other approaches, for instance in political science, that observe the growth of a constellation of regulatory actors (Mathieu, Verhoest, and Matthys 2017). We can describe the same constellation and intertwining of meta-organizations, meta-meta-organizations, and macro-organizations. What does this do to governance? To accountability to citizens? What does this do to the state and the common good? In particular, Mathieu and Valenzuela (2024) observe an ongoing new interventionism in certain countries, with increased 'regulatory governmentalisation'. This transformation of public policy making and regulatory governance implies a return to a form of control of regulatory decisions by governments. I would argue that multi-stakeholder meta-organizations (for instance local co-management committees involving economic players and public ones, alongside civil society and other organizations) might enable this operationalization of regulatory governmentalisation. To my knowledge, this type of regulatory hybrid intermediary remains understudied in political science and regulatory governance. More work needs to be done to investigate this question and understand this phenomenon and how this relates to work transformations, socio-

ecological complex problems, sustainability transitions and public policy. Causal complexity may be a useful approach for exploring this (Delacour and Zaara 2025).

Meta-organizing sustainable transformations of social orders in territories

The second main venue for research revolves around the role and design of meta-organizations (and especially multi-stakeholder ones) for sustainability transformations. Many literatures, and in particular transition studies, argue that deliberative governance is needed to create a shared vision of the sustainable desirable future (Weber and Rohracher 2012). One level for enacting such a shared vision is territories, such as Andalusia for the European Green deal and new industrial policy (Konnola, Berkowitz, and Pontikakis 2021; Pontikakis et al. 2020). However, the multi-level approach of transition studies tends to overlook the variability and richness of territories by focusing on either strategic local niche management—e.g. through incubators and innovation scaling-up strategies—or on national or transnational processes—e.g. industrial, research and innovation policy (Geels, Berkhout, and van Vuuren 2016; Gliedt, Hoicka, and Jackson 2018; Schot and Steinmueller 2018).

Such views contribute to a push towards a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to address grand challenges and sustainability transitions, despite a seemingly shared understanding that exploring alternative pathways and local experimentations and identifying regional opportunities is of paramount importance to ensure successful transitions (Pontikakis et al. 2020; Schot and Steinmueller 2018). This is perhaps even more paradoxical when transition processes are explicitly conceived as embedded in regional contexts and involving decentralized decision-making and participatory governance through shared agendas (Fernández and Romagosa 2020; Schot and Steinmueller 2018). However, implementing and accelerating transitions is harder when objectives have not been collaboratively defined and agreed upon by stakeholders (Loorbach 2007). This perspective of emerging social orders might explain why some of the literature considers intermediaries 'neutral' or 'without agency', thus neglecting collective actorhood, shared agendas

and values, incumbent industries' resistance to change and politics at different scales (Kivimaa et al. 2019).

More work is needed to understand whether and how meta-organizations can push counter-hegemonic transformations of social orders in territories, and what this means in terms of social bonds and relations between humans and more-than-humans (Berkowitz 2018; Berkowitz et al. 2020; Chaudhury et al. 2016). As I discussed previously, meta-organizations might constitute important transition intermediaries, playing key roles in transforming social orders. However, meta-organization studies share with transition studies a lack of concern for spatiality, territories or place-based theory (Coenen, Benneworth, and Truffer 2012; Pachoud, Koop, and George 2022). In other words, both streams of research tend to neglect spatial dimensions. Against this backdrop, more work is needed to discuss the characteristics and specificities of place-based meta-organizations as transition intermediaries at the territorial level. This problematizes whether and how meta-organizations, territories and transition pathways are affected by one another.

There is currently a shift in focus not only in management and organization studies but also social sciences in general, towards socio-natural ecosystems, species, more-than-human arrangements and territories or places where encounters with the more-than human occur (Arregui 2023; Beacham 2018; 2018; Bear 2017; Despret 2019; Komi and Kröger 2023; Labatut 2023; Lacerda 2023; Mercier-Roy and Mailhot 2024; Sayers, Forrest, and Pearson 2023; Taupin 2019; Zhong Mengual 2021; Ziegler et al. 2022). In that perspective, and contrary to the dominant view, territories are not just a 'level' (i.e. a level of analysis of, for instance, meta-organizational membership or meta-organizational mandates). Territories, territoriality and spatial embeddedness can be thought of as conditions for meta-organizational transformationality (Berkowitz et al. 2020; Berkowitz et al. 2023; Mazzilli et al. 2026). More interestingly, territories and territorialization can be conceived as 'processes' that construct and reveal actors, resources and ways of living and relating (François, Hirczak, and Senil 2013; Mazzilli and Pichault 2018). In a sense, territories or places are co-constituted by and with organizations (and supposedly meta-organizations). In that perspective, it can be interesting to think of 'place-based' or territorialized meta-

organizations as intermediaries for revealing such processes. Place-based meta-organizations are those that are not only anchored in their territories or places but also contribute to revealing them and co-evolve with them (Berkowitz et al. 2023; Mazzilli et al. 2026). In addition, territorialization as a process may challenge other processes happening in meta-organizations. For instance, how do territorialization processes affect, or how are they highlighted by, dialectical actorhood?

Many works on space or spatiality in organization studies rely on French geographer Henri Lefebvre's pioneer work. Lefebvre (1970, 1991) proposed several important concepts to understand the social significance of space. Lefebvre described 'lived space' as the particular space where individuals and communities experience and practice their everyday lives. In this space of daily lived experiences and encounters, people engage in social interactions, activities and daily routines. Lived space appears profoundly subjective and relational. It is intimately tied to personal and collective meanings and identities, to emotions and memories that are associated with a place. The lived space is truly about how we use space daily, whom (and what) we encounter there and how we relate to them. There is a growing trend in recent literature, especially in philosophy but also in social sciences in general, that views this lived space as a multispecies relational experience (Arregui 2023; Brugidou and Clouette 2018; Despret 2019; Komi and Kröger 2023; Massarella et al. 2021; Mercier-Roy and Mailhot 2024), where we encounter others and thus co-create a common world.

Decisional and alternative organizing among organizations

More work is also needed to understand the relations between meta-organizations, social orders and the emergence of alternative, more sustainable and fair social orders. Recent literature which focuses in particular on 'grand challenges' misses 1) the point about decisionalism or the importance of decided and non-decided social orders (Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz 2024) and 2) the importance of plural imaginaries and plural alternative ways of organizing (Vijay et al. 2026). Yet, the literature on grand challenges often advocates in favour of 'organizations' and explores what organization studies can bring, but

excludes organization theory from the analysis of collective action. If we take for instance the recent special issue on 'organizing for good' in the *Journal of Organization Design* (Baumann et al. 2024), collaborations are still considered separate from formal organizations and therefore fall under the 'informal networks' category.

Several points are of interest here. First of all, further investigation is needed to understand what is so specific about meta-organizations in relation to issues such as climate change. Climate change is a very peculiar global, complex problem that precisely results from our paradigm of organizations as systems of exploitation and destruction of nature. This raises the question of what value meta-organizing offers to help construct and organize collective action around this issue, and whether we can decouple that analysis from a political economy analysis (see Gibson-Graham 2006). Further, if we take stock of the proliferation of meta-organizations, orchestrated systems and macro-organizations, and organizational monsters more generally, more work is needed to analyse: 1) whether and how a particular form, level, scale and membership may be more suited to address a particular socio-ecological problem in a given territory; 2) why some forms actually amplify and perpetuate systems of domination and destruction; and 3) whether and how we can imagine alternative forms of organizing relations among organizations for sustainability, i.e. counter-hegemonic collaborations (Vijay et al. 2026).

Indeed, fruitful insights can be derived about meta-organizations and alternatives by integrating the broad and diverse literature on alternative modes of organizing (e.g. Barin Cruz, Alves, and Delbridge 2017; Barros and Michaud 2020; Daskalaki, Fotaki, and Sotiropoulou 2019; Huybrechts and Haugh 2018; Lacerda 2023; Shanahan 2023; Varman and Vijay 2022c; Vijay, Monin, and Kulkarni 2023). It would be interesting in particular to understand whether alternative organizations and organizers tend to organize in meta-organizations—if so, in what kind of meta-organizations, and if not, then why? Even further, one important question would be to understand whether and how decisionalism explains these varieties of forms and imaginaries, as well as the challenges and obstacles to alternative organizing, especially from a capitalistic perspective. To what extent are decided orders (e.g. orchestrated systems, meta-organizations and macro-organizations) linked to capitalism and neoliberalism? Can they provide the basic contexts for alternative organizing and imagining if we consider that

they are part of the problem?

In relation to this, it would be interesting to further investigate the concept of heterotopia (Berkowitz and Fernandes 2024; Varman and Vijay 2022b), potentially in relation to atmospheres (Leclair 2023). In particular, can heterotopias be designed and organized in a specific way in meta-organizations? Do they come with specific atmospheres, and do atmospheres resulting from meta-organizations as opposed to individual organizations? Does meta-organizing for heterotopia require, foster or correlate with specific decisional, structural and entitative organizationality and meta-organizationality profiles?

In line with this and with the issue of organizing democracies, one question that remains largely unanswered is how to represent and give voice to the voiceless in meta-organizations. It has been argued that place-based, multi-stakeholder meta-organizations can pilot just transitions, because they enable the shared, territorialized decision-making of local stakeholders, as well as coopetition and collaboration among different constituents and collective, processual valuing of socio-natural ecosystems (Berkowitz 2023b; Berkowitz et al. 2023). But who is missing from these meta-organizations, and should they be included? We know that women tend to be invisibilized, but so are other (gender, political, ethnic, age) marginalized groups. What kind of problems does this raise for meta-organizations, and especially for meta-organizations as alternative forms of organizing for just transitions? What kind of blind spot does this create, and what kind of injustices does it perpetuate?

Ultimately, the question remains as to whether and how meta-organizations (even those that are place-based and multi-stakeholder) can challenge the status quo. Following the non-scalability hypothesis, some forms of counter-hegemonic collaborations organized in meta-organizations may help to disseminate methodologies or frameworks, knowledge and practices across territories, to organize transnational or translocal solidarity. They can also produce multi-level effects through interactions with non-members (especially regulators). Transformative meta-organizations themselves could also be social innovations used to develop solutions to ecological or social problems, by collectively defining pathways that are adapted to each space rather than transposing, diffusing or scaling up innovations. It would be interested to further analyse this in relation to the issue of non-scalability.

Conclusion

While the academic community studying meta-organizations as such is expanding, more work is still needed to understand contemporary dynamics of meta-organizations and their interrelations with global social orders. More research, especially interdisciplinary research, is needed to consolidate knowledge about the empirical phenomena themselves, but also to grow our theoretical understanding of what affects the variety, function and internal organization of meta-organizations and the interactions and potential tensions between members and meta-level actors. Connecting with other fields may be valuable to further understand why meta-organizations proliferate and what this tells us about relations to the economic sphere, to public policy governance and governments.

I started this book with the idea that meta-organizations and western 'modern' society were co-constitutive of one another, taking inspiration from Perrow's, Bauman's and Whyte's works. Rosa (2010, 2019) argues that western modernity is characterized by acceleration, which creates different forms of alienation (he sees epidemics of burnouts as a symptom of this phenomenon). Combined with the desynchronizing of economic, political and technological temporalities, acceleration makes it difficult to articulate multiple interests and to foster democratic deliberation, the author further argues. To counter the alienation resulting from acceleration, Rosa offers resonance—that is, experiencing transformative, responsive and affective relations with the world (Rosa 2019). In that perspective, meta-organizations and meta-organizing processes may be viewed as both a symptom of and an attempt at dealing with this acceleration and desynchronization. But then, an interesting question some earlier works already raised about meta-organizations (Ettighoffer and Beneden 2000; Géniaux and Mira-Bonnardel 2003) is whether the proliferation of meta-organizations indicates a new form of organizing society or a transitory phase of society towards something else. Will the acceleration lead to more meta-organizing, through self-augmentation? Until when can it be manageable? Will we move to another form of social order, and what will this look like? Can we find Rosa's 'resonance' in social orders, and how? What does resonance mean at the level of meta-organizations?

In a sense, we can see a parallel with Mumford's idea of a

megamachine, for whom the organization of society prefigurates the emergence of technological machines (Chaudet 2020; Mumford 1973). "In his view, it is because we have thought of the social order as a symbolic machine that concrete machines have come to colonize our entire lived space", Chaudet writes about Mumford's concept of the megamachine (Chaudet 2020). Mumford tries to argue for a reversed causality relationship—i.e. it is the change in the organization of society that enables the emergence of certain technologies, tools and concrete (in flesh or not) machines. In that sense, Mumford's work resonates with Perrow's (1991) argument that the domination of organizations is the key parameter of contemporary societies. However, in the case of Mumford, the underlying organization of society enables the emergence of visible machines (Chaudet 2020). So, what in the megamachine enabled meta-organizations to grow and colonize society? Following that line of thought, is the very principle of 'growth' (GDP, performance, growth as self-development) embedded in the megamachine and is it feeding this growth, this proliferation of organizations and meta-organizations? And if we cannot get away from growth as a principle of the megamachine—an infra-organizational principle of contemporary social orders, to put it differently—how can we avoid unchecked, uncontrolled, unmanageable organizations and meta-organizations everywhere (i.e. organizational monsters)? Or on the contrary, are we reaching the limit of the meta-organizational model and will we observe a rupture, a bifurcation or a decrease, a consolidation and a deceleration?

Further, the industrial revolution was possible only because there was first a transformation in the organization of society, i.e. in social orders themselves. Similarly, if meta-organizations and society co-constitute one another, this could mean that, like the megamachine, the infra-organizationality of social orders prefigurates and enables the emergence of meta-organizations which in turn affect the infra-organizationality of social orders. There is a proliferation of local, national and global meta-organizations, and a proliferation of organizational monsters. What does that tell about the evolution of social orders, or about the megamachine? How do we change the megamachine? With this book on meta-organizations, I wanted to contribute to these debates about social orders and begin to explore ways to reconnect decisions, organizationality and responsibility, in meta-organizations and beyond.

Partial Glossary of Concepts

Contextual organizationality: From a decisional perspective, contextual organizationality describes specific contextual organizational dimensions that simultaneously shape, are shaped by and are constitutive of organizations. This means that contextual organizationality can both affect organization, be affected by it and be organized itself. Contextual organizationality involves at least three dimensions: temporality, territoriality and professionality.

Decidability/non-decidability: The decidability or changeability of social orders is the capacity of actors to reach collective decisions and change said social orders. Decidability implies three key characteristics of decisions in social orders: potential immediateness, accountability and specificity. If these characteristics are lacking, social orders become non-decidable.

Decidedness: Decidedness refers to the nature of social orders as being explicitly and recursively determined through series of decision-making processes that are embedded and nested within each other. This intertwined, recursive nature leads to the emergence of layered and interconnected decisions, across various levels (meta-level actors, members, individuals and non-members). 'Multi-level decidedness' precisely captures the unique interconnected dimension of meta-organizations where decisions at one level produce more decisions at that level and at other levels, but also influence and are influenced by decisions at other levels. Decidedness further implies decisionality and decidability.

Decisionalism, new decisionism, decisional organization theory or organization as decision theory: This theory views organization as an important phenomenon of contemporary society, "that of de-

paradoxifying decisions by creating decision-based social orders" (Grothe-Hammer et al. 2022, p. 35). Decisionalism brings together various concepts and approaches that share a common view of decisions as sub-communication events that are constitutive of organizations and of social orders. Decisionalism further translates into several dimensions that describe organizations and that are articulated together in this book, i.e. infra-organizationality, structural organizationality, entitative organizationality, contextual organizationality and meta-organizationality.

Decisionality or density: Decisionality, or density of decisions, describes the intensity or degree of decision-making in a social order about a given dimension. For instance, there can be more or fewer decisions made about membership, hierarchy, rules, sanctions, monitoring, collective identity, in an organization. Decisionality may also apply to contextual organizationality. Varying degrees of decisionality can lead to 'thin' (meta-)organizing (with low degrees of decisionality), or 'thick' (meta-)organizing (with high degrees of decisionality).

Dialectical actorhood: Dialectical actorhood refers to the complex dynamics that meta-organizations face to achieve and maintain meta-organizational actorhood, i.e. being acknowledged internally and externally as a social actor that can make decisions, can be addressed by others and can be held accountable for its decisions. The meta-organizational nature creates tensions between the autonomy, dependence, collective identity, accountability and responsibility of both members and the meta-level actor. This translates into meta-organizational actorhood as a dialectical process, with an internal dimension (negotiating between member autonomy and meta-level autonomy) and an external one (as meta-organizations become responsive to non-members and external parties).

Entitative organizationality: Entitative organizationality describes dimensions of the organization as a system or processual entity, i.e. interconnected decision-making, actorhood and collective identity.

Grassroots meta-organization: Grassroots meta-organizations are those meta-organizations that emerge in a bottom-up process, from local members themselves (e.g. indigenous meta-organizations in the Amazon rainforest).

Infra-organizationality: Infra-organizationality refers to the foundational and underlying parameters of social orders that affect their nature and dynamics: ontology, determination, changeability, acceptance, and density.

Layering of social orders: The addition and coexistence of new social orders (meta-organizations and more) alongside or on top of existing social orders (member organizations and more), without supplanting or substituting them.

Meta-organizational filiation: Relations that are created between meta-organizations across a field, domain or sector when a meta-organization builds the capacity of other meta-organizations and transmits knowledge, collective memories, social capital, inter-personal or inter-organizational networks, with key individuals acting as boundary spanners. Meta-organizational filiation can occur through incubation, spin-offs, integration, mergers and direct transfer.

Meta-organizational accountability: In meta-organizations tackling grand challenges, meta-organizational accountability describes: 1) the complex ties of accountability (understood both as taking responsibility for decisions and being held responsible by stakeholders) between the meta-organization and its members but also between the meta-organization, members and external public (including nonhumans); and 2) the various rules of transparency, reporting and other accountability mechanisms themselves that must be implemented at the meta-organizational level to ensure its effective accountability. Meta-organizational accountability constitutes one condition for responsible actorhood of transformative meta-organizations.

Meta-organizationality: Meta-organizationality describes the specific organizational attributes of meta-organizations, resulting from the specific nature of meta-organizations as both embedded processual entities and embedded structures relying on decisions. Meta-organizations are entities with other entities as their members. Simultaneously, meta-organizations are decided social orders, themselves constituted of and combining other decided (and non-decided) social orders. And meta-organizations further produce social order. Meta-organizationality involves multi-referentiality, layering, dialectical actorhood and multi-level decidedness.

Multi-referentiality: Multi-referentiality in meta-organizations aims to capture their evaluativeness and recursivity resulting from the diversity and multi-levelness of references, i.e. norms, values, expertise, knowledge, professionalities and perspectives that are brought together by the many member organizations in meta-organizations. These references can be homogeneous or heterogeneous, converging, conflicting or diverging. The recursive and evaluative dimension of multi-referentiality implies that members and the meta-level actor may value and prioritize the goals of the meta-organization differently, and in turn may be affected by this evaluativeness. Multi-referentiality is heightened in multi-stakeholder meta-organizations.

Multi-stakeholder meta-organization: Multi-stakeholder meta-organizations are those meta-organizations that gather members from different spheres or domains of society (different economic sectors, public administration, higher education and research, civil society), with therefore different references.

Negotiated professional restructuring: In transformative meta-organizations, negotiated professional restructuring describes the deliberative process through which members and meta-organizations contribute to renewing and adapting professional and labour activities to technological, ecological or social ruptures and bifurcations. This restructuring implies meta-organizational accountability and transformative mediated reflexivity. Negotiated professional restructuring constitutes a necessary condition for meta-organizations to become transformative. It allows transformative meta-organizations to address risks of labour resistance and facilitate labour adaptation to the new professions and sectors of the transition.

Organizational affordances: Organizational affordances are actionable characteristics that affect organizations' actions, and in return, their impacts, on more-than-human living beings or entities (e.g. oceans, rivers, earth, soils, space, forests and ecosystems).

Place-based meta-organizations: Place-based meta-organizations are meta-organizations that both shape their territories and are shaped by them. Place-based meta-organizations co-evolve with and co-constitute their territories.

Regulatory innovation intermediary: This term describes intermediaries playing a role in the regulation of innovation. As regulatory innovation intermediaries, meta-organizations can fill technologically-induced governance gaps through co-regulation, capacity building and self-regulation.

Responsible actorhood: Responsible actorhood is actorhood that is responsible towards others. This can be viewed as the ability of an organization or meta-organization to make decisions on its own while being externally acknowledged and addressable as a social actor, being held accountable for these decisions and also making decisions with care for future generations and a commitment to enacting a sustainable future. Responsible actorhood in transformative meta-organizations requires meta-organizational accountability, transformative mediated reflexivity and negotiated professional restructuring.

Structural organizationality: Structural organizationality describes the structural dimensions of a decided social order, that is to say its organizational components, i.e. characteristics of membership, authority, rules, monitoring and sanctions, in the sense of Ahrne and Brunsson's (2011) concept of partial organization.

Technologically-induced governance gaps: The speed and multiplication of technological innovations create a rapid and recurring disruption that accelerates the obsolescence of regulators and regulatory frameworks. This regulatory obsolescence creates specific governance gaps, or technologically-induced governance gaps.

Total responsibility: The principle of total responsibility across the value chain involves making visible all invisible effects of organizations on humans and more-than-humans, clarifying responsibility relations and accounting for all these effects, for instance in market prices or consumer information.

Transformative mediated reflexivity: In meta-organizations tackling grand challenges and piloting sustainability transitions, transformative mediated reflexivity describes a continuous process happening at the meta-level and mediated by the meta-level actor. This process consists in identifying, anticipating, taking into account and mitigating negative

impacts of decisions on all communities (including more-than-human ones). Engaging in transformative mediated reflexivity is essential for the development of transformative meta-organizations.

Transformative meta-organizations: Transformative meta-organizations are meta-organizations that act as local agents or intermediaries of transformative change, i.e. they actively contribute to sustainability transitions.

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Index

Acampamento Terra Livre (ATL) 85, 90–91
accountability 40, 44, 56, 58, 65–66, 75–77, 79, 81–82, 84, 87–88, 96, 105–109
actorhood
  dialectical 44, 64–66, 68–69, 84, 88, 96, 99, 107
  orchestrated 83
  responsible 87–88, 107
advocacy 18, 34, 46, 49, 81, 84, 95
agriculture 2–3, 23, 25, 95
Ahrne, Göran 6, 13–14, 16, 19–22, 27, 34, 39–42, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 72, 93, 109
alternative organizing 87, 99–100
Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) 85, 90, 93
attribution 19, 21, 62, 65–66, 77–78, 81, 86
autonomy 3, 40, 42, 55, 64–66, 74, 78, 106

Bauman, Zygmunt 4, 77–78, 94, 102
Bor, Sanne 21, 62
Brazil 82, 90, 93
Brunsson, Nils 6, 13–14, 16, 19–22, 27, 33–35, 39–42, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 72, 77–78, 80, 82, 93, 95, 109
business meta-organization 23–25, 32, 82, 84

capacity 2, 4, 9, 14, 33, 35–36, 46, 49, 78, 105, 107, 109
capitalism 9, 73–74, 86, 89, 100
Catalunya 1, 27, 35, 72, 90–91
changeability 51, 60–62, 68–69, 85, 105, 107
co-dependence 59–60, 64, 66, 84
collaboration 3, 6, 10, 15, 33, 40, 48, 53, 72, 75, 90–92, 94, 97, 100–101
collective identity 35, 39, 44, 52, 58–59, 65–66, 68–69, 78, 84, 106
committee, co-management 1, 15, 19, 26–28, 30, 93, 96
community 2–3, 17–19, 21, 39, 48, 52–53, 74, 79, 82, 85–86, 90–91, 99, 102, 110
complexity 3, 15, 22–23, 27, 33, 43, 47, 58, 61, 63–65, 71, 73–74, 87, 96–97, 100, 106–107
Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira (COIAB) 90
Coulombel, Philippe 53
counter-hegemonic dynamics 5, 11, 52, 89, 92, 94–95, 98, 100–101
creative destruction 9
crowdfunding 2, 25, 35, 37, 43, 46, 59
culture 15, 19, 43, 79, 89–90

decidability 62–63, 65–67, 105
decidedness 5–7, 34, 39, 41, 44–45, 47, 50–54, 58–60, 62–69, 73–74, 78, 80, 82–85, 87–88, 91, 96, 99–100, 105, 107, 109
decisionalism, new decisionism, decisional organization theory or organization as decision theory 7, 11, 54, 57–61, 63, 69, 73, 77, 99–100, 105
decisionality. *See* density
density 58, 61–63, 66–69, 79–80, 84–85, 105–107
dilution 76–80, 82–84, 96
directionality 80–84, 88
domain 1, 13, 16, 22–24, 31, 38, 64, 94–95, 107–108

ecosystem 9, 21, 26–27, 49, 52–53, 79, 91, 98, 101, 108
Empordà 28, 72, 90–91
European Union (EU) 16, 18, 23–24,

28, 35, 79–82, 84, 93–94
evaluativeness 64, 108
Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) 26, 28, 31

Fernandes, José Augusto Lacerda 79
filiation 46, 107
Finance Participative France (FPF) 2–3, 20, 35, 37, 93
fisheries 1, 3, 15, 26, 28, 30, 35, 93
France 2, 16, 20, 31–32, 35, 37, 55, 93

Gadille, Martine 88
Garaudel, Pierre 21
Gibel, Roman 80
governance 1, 6–8, 15, 19, 23, 25, 33–34, 37–38, 46–49, 75, 87, 89–90, 92, 96–97, 102, 109
grassroots meta-organization 28, 79
Grothe-Hammer, Michael 58, 61–63, 67

hegemony 5, 11, 52, 76, 89, 92, 94
heterarchy 40
heterotopia 89–92, 101
hierarchy 58–59, 91, 106

imperatives 71–76, 88, 92
indigenous meta-organizations 19, 28–29, 74, 85, 90
influence 18, 33–37, 40, 69, 75, 84, 94, 105
innovation 3, 7–10, 21–22, 25–26, 43, 46–49, 73, 75–76, 87, 97, 101, 109
institutions 6–8, 16–18, 23, 28, 33, 39, 41, 47, 50–51, 63
interconnected systems of decisions 52, 58, 68–69, 78, 105–106
intermediaries 8, 10, 46–50, 87, 91, 96–99, 109–110
  innovation 8, 47–49, 109
  regulatory 48–49, 91
  transition 48–49, 91, 98

layering 7, 39, 51–52, 64–65, 68–69, 73, 77–78, 87–88, 96, 105, 107
Lefebvre, Henri 89–90, 99
Luhmann, Niklas 47, 57, 59, 61, 66, 68

macro-organization 66, 76–86, 92, 96, 100
membership 14, 20–22, 24–30, 32–33, 36–38, 45, 48, 52, 58–59, 64, 75, 98, 100, 106, 109
Mercosur 35, 79–82, 84, 94
meta-level actors 3, 34–36, 39–40, 44–45, 53, 57, 65–66, 74, 77, 80, 82, 102, 105–106, 108–109
monitoring 52, 56, 58–60, 106, 109
more-than-humans 4, 85–86, 88–89, 91–92, 98, 108–110
multi-directionality 80–81, 83–84, 88
multi-referentiality 64–65, 68–69, 75, 80, 88, 90–92, 107–108
multi-stakeholder meta-organization 2, 5, 15, 19–20, 22, 25–27, 30, 33, 42, 64, 75, 87, 90–91, 95–97, 101, 108

negotiated professional restructuring 88, 108–109
networks 6–7, 16–18, 23–24, 26, 39, 41, 43, 46, 48, 50–51, 54, 59, 61–63, 100, 107
non-decidability 62–63, 65–67, 105
non-scalability 101

oil and gas 14–16, 20–21, 25–26, 29–31, 43, 45, 73, 75
orchestrated order 80, 83
organizational affordances 108
organizationality
  contextual 52, 61, 63, 67–69, 105–106
  entitative 52, 58–59, 61, 63, 67–69, 78, 82, 84–85, 101, 106
  infra- 51, 63, 67–69, 103, 106–107
  meta- 44, 52, 63–64, 66–69, 88, 101, 106–107
  structural 51, 58–59, 61, 68–69, 78, 80, 106, 109
organizational monsters 76–77, 80, 92, 94–96, 100, 103

paradox 6, 56–57, 59, 71, 73–74, 92–93, 97, 106
partial organization 57–58, 96, 109
participating organizations 79, 81–85
Perrow, Charles 4–5, 94, 102–103
place-based meta-organization 5, 75, 92, 98, 101
policy 5–9, 43, 48, 75, 86, 96–97, 102
power 1, 55–56, 79–80, 84, 92, 94
professionality 52, 60–61, 68–69, 105

regulation 2, 7–8, 34, 46, 49, 74–75, 84, 87, 91, 109
resources 3, 9–10, 14, 20–21, 33, 36, 40, 47, 55, 82, 86, 91, 98
resourcification 5, 94
responsibility 4, 7, 9, 44, 47, 65, 71–74, 76–88, 92, 96, 103, 106–107, 109
Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia 4, 94
rules 22, 34, 36, 51–52, 58–59, 78, 106–107, 109

sanctions 22, 34, 52, 56, 58–59, 106, 109
sectoralization 14, 29–33
social order 3–4, 6–7, 10–11, 34, 39–41, 45, 50–54, 56–69, 71–75, 79–80, 82, 85–90, 92, 94–95, 97–99, 102–103, 105–107, 109
solidarity 9, 14, 91–92, 101
Souchaud, Antoine 59
space 61, 71, 90, 99, 101, 103, 108. *See also* spatiality
spatiality 28, 60, 68, 89, 98–99
specialization 1, 14, 29–30
specificity 14–15, 29–30, 32–33, 56, 87, 95, 105
sustainability 2–3, 7, 9–10, 14–15, 28, 30, 49, 71–72, 75–76, 87–89, 91, 95, 97, 99–100, 109–110

technologically-induced governance gap 46, 109
temporality 52, 60–62, 68–69, 91, 102, 105
territoriality 52, 60–61, 68–69, 85, 90–92, 98–99, 101, 105
territory 8–9, 26–27, 49, 69, 76–77, 87, 95, 97–101, 108
tipping points 44, 46, 63, 85
total responsibility 109
transformative mediated reflexivity 88, 108–110
transformative meta-organization 87–88, 92, 107–110
transition studies 9, 43, 47, 75, 97–98
transparency 16–17, 43, 107

un-responsible dependence 84

Varman, Rohit 89–90
Vijay, Devi 89–90
VPSHR 20

Whyte, David 77, 78, 94, 102

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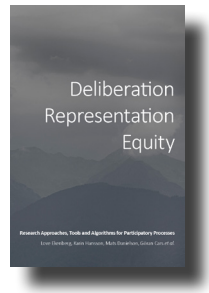

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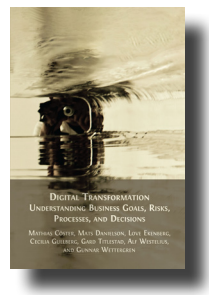

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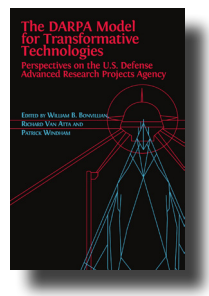

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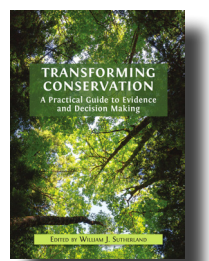

A Society of Meta-Organizations

Héloïse Berkowitz

Our contemporary societies are made of meta-organizations — organizations composed of other organizations. These range from international bodies like the International Whaling Commission, to national industry or business associations like the crowdfunding association Finance Participative France, to local associations such as fisheries co-management committees in Catalunya. Meta-organizations have become a defining feature of how actors coordinate, govern and make collective decisions. But what exactly makes them distinct, and why do they matter — both in theory and in practice?

This books delves into the importance, characteristics and diversity of meta-organizations. It explores four interrelated perspectives: meta-organizations as a widespread, heterogeneous empirical phenomenon in contemporary society, as a conceptual framework that raises specific methodological challenges, as part of a broader theory of decision-based social orders, and ultimately as arenas where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic dynamics may unfold.

By bridging theory and practice, this work offers new insights into how meta-organizations operate, how they can be studied and understood, the problems they raise and what they can achieve under certain conditions — making it essential reading for practitioners, students, scholars, and policymakers alike.

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